

PAIR UP

with Maria Terry



March 2020 – Fun Fennel

Fennel is one of my favorite flavors. The black licorice or anise flavor can be used in both sweet and savory preparations. I have put together this menu to feature some delicious fennel dishes. I like putting together special lunches for friends because lunches are like “dinner-lite.” The food is simpler, dessert is unnecessary or uncomplicated, and no candles are expected. Furthermore, when you add wine or spirits midday, it’s almost like you are on vacation.

Start with the easiest salad possible like simple spring greens dressed with this Creamy Fennel Dressing and topped with a few toasted pine nuts. When serving a salad with wine, the most challenging part is balancing the acid. The food cannot be sourer than the wine. You will need a wine with substantial acidity and salad ingredients that offset the acid in the dressing.

Verdicchio [vare-dee-kee-oh] is a white Italian wine grape grown primarily in the Marche region of central Italy and is ideal for salad. The name Verdicchio derives from the Italian word “verde,” which means “green” and refers to the slight green hue. It has lots of acidity and citrus flavors. I recreated the dressing recipe from one I had at a Lake Tahoe restaurant many years ago. They wouldn’t give me the recipe, so I worked for years to reproduce it. Fennel is the key to the flavor. The sugar and cheese in the dressing and the pine nuts on top balance the vinegar and keep the salad from overpowering the wine.

Continue the Italian wine theme with an Insolia for the main course. Insolia is a white wine grape from Sicily. It has a silky texture with citrus, tropical, and nutty flavors. There is also a slight minerality that is reminiscent of wet stone or crushed rocks to create interest. It is perfect with

Fettuccine with Mustard Greens and Mushrooms. The silky pasta will mimic the texture of the wine, and the mushrooms add an earthy note that picks up the minerality and nuttiness in the wine. The greens aren’t going to benefit the wine but add a welcome bitterness to the dish. In case you can’t find an Insolia, an Italian Pinot Grigio will work in a pinch.

Keeping things simple, end your meal with a small glass of Sambuca and some store-bought biscotti. Sambuca (sam-boo-ka) is an Italian anise-flavored liqueur. It is either clear (white sambuca), deep blue (black sambuca), or bright red (red sambuca). The traditional serving is with three coffee beans, each representing health, happiness, and prosperity. You can even ignite it to toast the coffee beans, but remember to extinguish it before drinking. For those who have to go back to work for the day, coffee is an excellent alternative with biscotti.

So, go on. Pair Up!

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Creamy Fennel Dressing

INGREDIENTS

- ½ cup olive oil
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- ¼ cup white wine vinegar
- 2 Tbsp. fresh fennel fronds (basil or tarragon), chopped
- 2 Tbsp. Parmesan cheese
- ½ Tbsp. distilled white vinegar
- ½ Tbsp. sugar
- 1 clove garlic or shallots, chopped fine
- ½ tsp. salt
- ¼ tsp. pepper

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DIRECTIONS

Blend all ingredients together. Chill.

Yield: about a cup

Fettuccine with Mustard Greens and Mushrooms

INGREDIENTS

10 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil plus a little more as necessary, divided
6 cups roughly chopped fresh mushrooms such as shiitake or morel
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 Tbsp. minced garlic
2 Tbsp. finely chopped fresh thyme leaves
1 tsp. fennel seeds
4 cups double-strength chicken broth or 4 cups canned low-salt chicken broth, boiled until reduced by half
6 cups packed roughly chopped mustard greens, green chard, or spinach
1½ pound dried fettuccine
4 Tbsp. unsalted butter
4 Tbsp. finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

DIRECTIONS

Heat ¼ cup of the olive oil in a large sauté pan over medium-high heat until hot. Add the mushrooms and do not move them until they begin to brown, about 1 minute. Sauté until brown all over, about 5 minutes. Add another tablespoon olive oil if the pan is too dry. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Add the garlic and cook quickly until light brown. Add the thyme, fennel seeds, and stock and bring to a boil. Add the greens, season with salt and pepper, and simmer until tender, about 8 minutes.

Meanwhile, bring a large pot of water to a boil and add salt. Add the pasta and cook until al dente, about 12 minutes. Drain, refresh quickly under cool running water, and toss with the remaining tablespoon olive oil.

Stir the butter into the greens and add the pasta and parsley. Toss to heat through and add half of the Parmesan. Toss well again and pour onto a heated serving platter. Dust with the other half of Parmesan and serve. Yield: 6- 8 servings
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