

January 2007
Thoughts for the New Year and Picks from the Old
By Katy Budge

Happy New Year to everyone and many thanks for your past and continued support of CasaFestiva.com!

As I was trying to come up with a topic for my January essay, I was torn between a “New Year’s Resolution” angle and a “Best of” approach. In typical fashion for me, I decided to do both, so you’ll find a little philosophizing up front and some favorite finds at the end.

Since I launched this site last fall, people have often asked me why or what I wanted to accomplish with it. I came up with various answers, ranging from a simple “I’m not sure yet,” to much longer ones that I’ll spare you. Not surprisingly, I found the perfect answer from the mouth of none other than Alice Waters. At the considerable risk of comparing my minor effort to the historic sea change ushered in by Chez Panisse, I’ll share these words from Waters’ recent appearance on the Sundance Channel’s “Iconoclasts” series.



Swiss Chard at the Morro Bay Farmers’ Market

“I’m trying to make it really a political place, where people are not just engaged in the creative process of making food, but they are aware of the consequences out there in the world. The one thing that we can do is make very conscious choices about everything that we eat everyday ... you think about it – that you’re giving your money to the people who have the same set of values, the people are taking care of the land for the future.”

That, in a locally-grown nutshell, is what I’m trying to do as well. Yes, I’m wanting to share the fun and delight in “exploring the culture of cuisine,” and I love making people aware of the wonderful foodstuffs available from neighborhood farms and small food producers. However, I also want to make everyone realize the impact of their food buying decisions, to make them aware that they can shape their own culture of cuisine.

Obviously, I urge everyone to get to know your local producers at farmers’ markets and the like, however, I realize that for many people that still isn’t a viable option. Nonetheless, there are still steps everyone can take: if you can’t make it to farmers’ markets, at least check the label of that avocado to see whether it’s grown in Chile or California, or if you crave a hamburger, at least explore a neighborhood joint instead of always going to a corporate fast-food place. Think about it this way – if you ran a small, family-owned business, wouldn’t you want your friends and neighbors to patronize it?

Before I (hopefully) come off sounding too righteous, let me make it clear that I’m certainly no purist. Yes, I shop at big corporate stores sometimes (though I’m a tad particular about which ones), and I don’t buy all my food products from local sources (though it is remarkably possible; check out my “Locovore” entry from last year), and sometimes I just really, really want a mango and all those other delights we can only get from far away lands. We have become, after all, a global economy with all the ensuing mindsets and tastes, but it’s important to remember that we all have choices.

Granted those choices are laced with widely different circumstances. For me, it’s easy to walk my talk -- I’m a food writer committed to local products; my “job” is to find, enjoy, and promote those products. I also live on the Central Coast of California, which makes eating seasonally pretty much akin to shooting fish in a barrel. I realize that others don’t have it so easy. What about a single parent with three ravenous teenagers, a middle-class family living where there is real winter, or even a single person -- young or old -- who doesn’t feel like cooking for one?

So what’s my challenge to people? Simply this -- become aware, stay informed, and realize the remarkable power of your food dollars. After that, it’s up to you.

Okay class, now for the fun stuff -- favorite finds from 2006!

Foodstuffs and Provisions:

Don Sherwood offers good old fashioned butcher service and quality items at his Cayucos Fine Meats and Grateful Deli located inside the Cayucos Supermarket, 301 South Ocean, open daily from 8 a.m.-8 p.m. For more information, special orders, or catering, call 995-3929.

At Gold Coast Meats, hormones, antibiotics, and low-grade feed have flown the coop. You won’t find any of those things in the chickens now being offered under Owner Alana Estrada’s fledgling label. Yes, the chicken costs a bit more, but you know what you’re eating. Available at Nature’s Touch Nursery and Harvest, 140 7th Street in Templeton. Hours are Monday-Friday 9 a.m.-5 p.m., and Saturday 9 a.m.-2 p.m. For more information or special orders, (805) 434-3062.

Organic and fair trade java from Joseph and Isabel Gerardis at Joebella Coffee; available at select markets, on-line at www.joebellacoffee.com, or by calling 461-4822.

Pasolivo’s olive oils are always good, and the label took home several honors in some heavy-weight competitions in 2006. The Olio Nuovo (“new oil”) is a cut above, with intense green, peppery flavors. www.pasolivo.com.

Jeff and Lindsay Jackson have created a foodies’ home at The Range in Santa Margarita. They source local producers whenever possible, and offer Jeff’s upscale cuisine in a cozy retro-Western atmosphere. Located at 22317 G Street (the “main drag”), Santa Margarita, 438-4500; no credit cards or reservations.

Not surprisingly, Christine Maguire’s Rinconada Dairy cheeses have emerged as award-winning artisan cheeses, including a first place win for the La Panza in the Farmstead Cheese category of the 2006 American Cheese Society 23rd Annual Conference and Competition in Portland. For information on retail availability, go to www.rinconadadairy.com.

Mark and Bonnie Tognazzini source the freshest fish possible from the local fishing fleet at their Dockside Too Fish Market, located right behind the Dockside Restaurant at 1245 Embarcadero in Morro Bay, open from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. in the winter and from 8 a.m.-6 p.m. in the summer. For more information on available fish or for special orders, call 772-8100, or go to www.bonniemarietta.com.

And, as always, fresh produce from farmers’ markets, such as blueberries and heirloom tomatoes from Dragon Spring Farm, artichokes and asparagus from Green Family Farm, squash from Dos Pasos Ranch, and unique fruits and amazing tuberoses from Swift Subtropicals.

Potent Potables:

Three new labels raised the bar for Central Coast wines in 2006:

Niner Wine Estates, www.ninerwine.com – favorites were the Sauvignon Bland and Sangiovese;

Sextant Wines, www.sextantwines.com – great Zinfandels;

Tangent Wines, www.tangentwines.com – a new white-wine-only venture from sister winery Baileyana that taps the considerable talents of winemaker Christian Roguenant, and is a great entry into Albariño.

And speaking of Albariño, 2006 was the year that Spanish wines really began hitting their stride in the States. If you haven’t already, try some of these new imports and varieties – Tempranillo is a great red wine with a lot of dishes such as spicy fare, grilled meats, and tapas; Garnacha (gar-notch-a), the Spanish spelling of Grenache, may already be a familiar red wine grape for many people, and is a great match with soft cheeses and meats such as grilled pork loin. More about Spain’s Priorat region at the SF Chronicle.

If you’ve ever had to defend the fact that yes, wine does have flavors other than “just wine,” just crack open a bottle of Pomelo Sauvignon Blanc, a new offering from Randy Mason at Mason Cellars. With a zesty nose and taste of grapefruit, those doubters will become believers! The intense flavor makes it a tad complicated to pair with food, but it’s a great summertime quaffer. www.pomelowine.com.

Other great Sauvignon Blancs (okay, you’ve guessed by now that I’m a big fan of Sauv Blanc done correctly!): Silver Stone Wines, www.silverstonewines.com, Winemaker Dan Kleck does a good job on all his wines, and his Sauvignon Blanc is no exception;

Robert Hall Winery, www.roberthallwinery.com, this crisp wine from Winemaker Don Brady is a great food wine – think goat cheese, Asian fare, etc.

With all the rage about Rhone wines, Viogniers that don’t have the right fruit or proper attention can be flaccid and bad varietal representations. Certainly not the case with Villicana Winery’s 2005 Viognier, which is unfortunately sold out; I mention it because it was one of the stellar wines I tasted this past year, so I’m looking forward to Alex Villicana’s next release! www.villicanawinery.com.

I’m not a big fan of the latest rage in flavored vodkas, many of which are cloying or have a faint chemical-born-in-the-lab taste, but the handcrafted Hangar One vodkas made in the old Alameda Naval Air Station are altogether different. My particular favorite is the Kaffir Lime, which is great just on its own. www.hangarone.com.

My latest favorite tequilas are those from Tezón – all handcrafted, and the artisan approach -- hand selecting the agave, slow roasting it for three days, and crushing it with a huge volcanic stone wheel – pay off in the incredible smoothness, even including the Blanco, which has a remarkably lively citrus tone. Not cheap, for sipping instead of for margaritas.

Far Afield Finds:

Trinity Brewhouse -- KILLER IPA on tap in Providence, Rhode Island. Enough said.

Yankee Spirits -- Even jet-lagged, I managed to spend almost two hours at the Attleboro, MA location checking out incredible wine selections from Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, etc., etc., etc. Even the California Central Coast was well represented. Kudos to Wine Manager John Hannum.

Westport Rivers Vineyard and Winery -- Okay, maybe I should have guessed that coastal Mass would be a great growing region for sparkling varieties, but I didn’t and was therefore quite pleasantly surprised by these estate wines.