

Wine Lover VIRGINIA

CELEBRATING THE GOOD LIFE

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WINE AND TODAY'S "HUNTING CAMP"

By Alan Pyles, Owner, The Layfayette Inn



Nearly every year of my life I have participated in "hunting camp". Some of the camps being fairly primitive (certainly no cable!) and others being an undercover spa. What I find interesting is, each provides both a pleasant experience and a common ground to make new (perhaps/often) temporary friends.

One particular hunting camp evokes strong memorable experiences. That being in South Dakota during pheasant season. After a long day of hunting, people from all over the nation, varied walks of life returned to the local (semi-dive) hotel. The strangest thing followed, as we walked down the hall, 90% of the room doors are open. Hunters are walking from room to room, meeting people for the same time, sharing their experiences, and who knows, perhaps embellishing just a tad in the

process. Boundaries dropped, and everyone seemed to get a long just fine. A pleasant reminder of how our society can blend when the superficial items are stripped. In this case, everyone was decked out in their best Cabala's gear for the "fashion conscious" and the Wal-Mart for the more fiscal aware.

When the financial, educational and social boundaries are not overbearing and a common interest presents itself, everyone was able to interact and have a wonderful time. This does not mean we can take away a different, but unique perspective on the experience, but regardless a common ground can be appreciated.

Our local vineyards provide a very similar experience. People from all walks of life "belly up" to the tasting bar and have the opportunity to taste some of the wonderful wines that Virginia has matured to provide. All of a sudden, a common bond is found among those tasting, or sitting on the decks tasting wines and enjoying artisan cheeses or gourmet box lunches. Randomly found (albeit temporary) new friends share their favorite wine experiences, pairings, and gaffs if their being really honest (the "swirler" splashes the red wine on all around them remains one of my favorites!). The strange fact that we can accept differences in our wine taste without looking down on one another is a comforting fact, some like sweet wines, red wines or some of us "old school" still like oak! Such differences in taste are considered just that, differences. Not inferior selections or qualities that we often see tagged on fellow humans!

The final ingredient to make hunting camp spectacular is the food. While successful camp memories can be made with bologna and cheese sandwiches (my Dad's favorite, especially if simply between saltines), the stronger memories resulted from camps where the dinner was the icing on the culinary cake.

At the Lafayette Inn we try to encompass all of the aspects to provide for the guest to have an outstanding experience. We are proud of our winning wine list, winners of Wine Enthusiast Restaurant Award every year. Aside from hand picked wines, we are proud to offer 45 different Virginia wines as part of our inventory. Our menu was purposely selected largely from a random sampling of corporate dining for over 20 years. Approachable items presented in an elegant, but real fashion. We take special pride in knowing our wines personally (a part of the "job" that I take personal passion in researching!), and helping guests pair with their dinner selections. Finally, we believe all of the above is critical, but atmosphere remains a significant part of finalizing the package. My wife, Kaye on a seemingly daily basis is researching antique stores, e-bay and flea markets (a part of the "job" that she takes personal passion in researching!), all to make our guests "feel" the overall culinary experience.

Finally-full circle. Hand selected wines, cautiously researched menus, "professionally shopped" décor and accents all help create the culinary "hunting camp" experience for our guests. A common sighting at the Inn- two (sometimes three or more) have made temporary friends across the dinner tables. Social, educational and financial backgrounds aside, for a period in time...friends are made. Some perhaps preferring the barrel fermented chardonnay that Prince Michel has to offer. Others that claim they cannot get enough of Stone Mountain's Petit Verdot. The ones claiming to be on the inside track bragging about the about to be known, Sweeley Estates Merlot. Each having a strong preference, but sharing the common ground for a period.

Hunting camps, vineyard tasting rooms or restaurants- each provide a glimmer of how we truly can "all get along". Thank you Virginia wine.

READ ON FOR A TASTY RECIPE USING VENISON...

BACK STRAP VENISON WITH A SHERRY AND MUSHROOM SAUCE

Begin the meal with a bed of mixed greens, topped with goat cheese and nuts. Pair it with Stone Mountain's Pinot Grigio.

- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground sage
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 4 tablespoons butter, divided
- 1 cup chopped Vidalia onion
- 2 cups sliced mushrooms or baby bellas
- 6 (3-4 ounce) venison back strap steaks
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 3/4 cup sherry
- 1/4 cup water



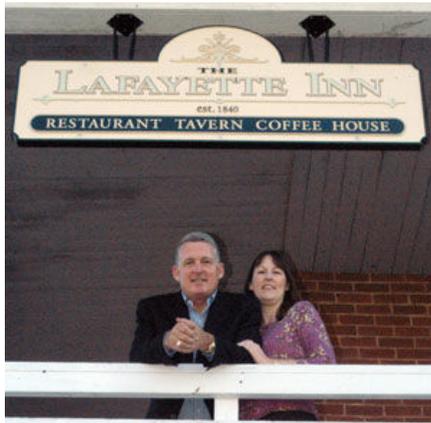
Preparation:

1. Combine 1/2 cup flour, sage, salt, and pepper in a resealable bag, set aside. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a large pan over medium heat. Stir in onion and cook until almost soft. Add mushrooms and continue cooking until soft. Remove from pan.
2. Turn heat to medium-high and melt 2 tablespoons of butter in pan. Toss the venison steaks in the seasoned flour and shake off the excess. Sear venison in butter for 6 to 7 minutes per side and remove.
3. Reduce heat to medium-low, and melt the remaining tablespoon of butter. Whisk in 1 tablespoon of flour, followed by the sherry and water. Return the vegetables and meat to the pan. Increase heat, and simmer for 15 minutes.

When we enjoyed this at "hunting camp", the chef prepared roasted potato slices with simply olive oil, salt and pepper and in our case, green bean casserole.

Open a bottle of Sweely Estates Merlot and enjoy the savory taste as the wine and entrée blend together.

Finally, after such a rich and filling entrée, a plate with some artisan cheeses and Prince Michel's American Port is the perfect "dessert"!



Alan Pyles is the owner of The Lafayette Inn located at 146 E. Main Street in Stanardsville, VA. Visit their website at www.thelafayette.com.

(Pictured to the left: Alan and Kaye Pyles)