



Jacob Gragg, Ca' del Bosco and portfolio fine wine specialist for Santa Margherita USA (SMUSA); Luis La Torre, Texas Italian wine specialist at Republic National Distributing Company (RNDC) in Dallas, TX; Carlos Cisneros, sommelier at Bocca Ristorante in Birmingham, AL; and Jordan Abraham, wine director at Gozu in San Francisco, CA, join in a toast to the opening of TEXSOM 2022 over dinner at Uchi in Dallas.

SommFoundation scholarship recipients Grace Bradley (left), wine director at Vie and Vistro Prime restaurants in Chicago, IL, and Jordan Abraham look on as Cantina Mesa Giunco Vermentino is poured at SMUSA's TEXSOM welcome dinner.

PHOTOS: MARCUS JUNIUS LAWS

The Return of the Thing

TOASTING TO TEXSOM WITH **CA' DEL BOSCO** AND **CANTINA MESA**

by Lars Leicht

THE HISTORIC GATHERING of Vikings and Teutonic tribes for educational, legislative, and/or trade purposes was called a Thing; that's what the word originally referred to until its definition morphed to denote any object. At a Thing, old friends and rivals, colleagues and strangers would come together in camaraderie—itsself a term derived from the Latin term for a chamber where people congregated.

In the wine world, we have our Things as well: key annual events we mark on the calendar in anticipation of coming together to achieve mutual goals. But of all our conferences, festivals, and the like, perhaps the most truly Thing-like is TEXSOM, the sommelier symposium held each August in Dallas.

Like so much of "normal" life, TEXSOM was disrupted by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. (Yes, there was a hastily organized version in November 2021 as restrictions on public gatherings began

to lift, but it just wasn't the same.) In 2022, however, the Thing was back in all its glory, boasting a new venue, better-organized expo tastings during breaks, a return to more in-depth seminars, and many other improvements.

Among the many wine companies eager to support the community and get back to business was Santa Margherita USA (SMUSA). The importer put its best foot forward, mobilizing a larger team than usual while offering attendance scholarships through SommFoundation, sponsoring a polishing party for volunteers who prepped stemware pre-conference, pouring its award-winning wines at the Grand Tasting, and organizing not one but two paired tastings for attendees.

For starters, SMUSA hosted a provocative opening-night dinner at Uchi, an acclaimed Japanese restaurant in Dallas' Arts District. Set in a former private home, the cozy establishment serves

the makimono, yakimono, tempura, sushi, sashimi, and seasonal small plates on which chef Tyson Cole made his name at the original Uchi in Austin. Did the cuisine present a bold challenge for Italian wines? On the contrary, the selections of Franciacorta from Ca' del Bosco and Sardinian wines from the aforementioned Cantina Mesa fared quite well alongside the parade of over 20 dishes that came out to the table.

Of course, it was no surprise that the sparkling wines—Ca' del Bosco's Cuvée Prestige Edizione 44 and Dosage Zéro—worked with the food, but just how well they paired was a revelation to dinner guest and scholarship recipient Jordan Abraham, wine director at Gozu in San Francisco. "I wanted them with everything, and they worked in really interesting and delicious ways that I didn't expect," he said. "The [Dosage Zéro] was fantastic and really speaks to the technical ability

and farming that went into that bottle. It was even texturally good with the A5 wagyu . . . with a ton of creaminess to go with the fat of the beef. And the Prestige surprised me by how well it showed with some of the more delicate dishes.”

For her part, fellow scholarship recipient Grace Bradley, wine director at Vie and Vistro Prime restaurants in Chicago, was enthusiastic about Mesa’s Giunco Vermentino and Ca’ del Bosco’s Maurizio Zanella Chardonnay, which were served side by side. “That was my favorite flavor experience of the evening,” she said. “I took two bites of every morsel of food, followed by each wine in turn. The Vermentino and raw fatty fish [made for] a great contrasting pairing of salt, citrus, and richness.” Meanwhile, when the Chardonnay was paired “with something a touch leaner, the flavor of the fish was enhanced and the Chardonnay seemed to shine a little brighter as well.”

Bradley was also impressed by the pairing of the Chardonnay with charred Japanese eggplant nigiri. “The eggplant was cooked to perfection, chewy on one side and soft on the other,” she noted. “Then you add in the Chardonnay, with its toasty notes from carefully chosen small barrels bringing out the caramelized-sugar sweetness of the eggplant. The wine’s flavors of almost-bruised yellow apples and pears

made the more tertiary flavor of the vegetable seem luscious yet rustic. I could go on forever about this pairing and the way that eggplant was cooked.”

As for Abraham, he observed that the Vermentino had great freshness even as it clearly showed the classic Sardinian texture of viscosity along with yellow apple and stone fruit. “I loved this with the shishito peppers,” he said. “It had a light volcanic smokiness and minerality which was also awesome with the smoked yellowtail.”

Finally, two red wines from Cantina Mesa—Buio and Buio Buio, both made from Carignano—made for an appropriate pairing with the thin slices of wagyu beef cooked by the guests on hot rocks brought to the table. “The Buio was lighter, friendlier, and full of red fruit laced with a touch of pepper,” offered Bradley. “The Buio Buio was more brooding; [with] the fruit less pronounced, [it was] far more peppery, earthy, and mushroomy. Both were [also] delicious with the tartare, the Buio bringing out the meatiness of the beef and the Buio Buio accenting the generous amount of black pepper over the top.”

For both Abraham and Bradley, the dinner represented everything that is great about a Thing—especially educational enrichment and conviviality. “Being in a

room full of like-minded and passionate wine professionals was the perfect kickoff to TEXSOM,” said Bradley. “Only on rare occasions do I get to enjoy the company of multiple sommeliers—and never in the joyous type of gathering that only an amazing meal and great wine can ensure.”

Luckily, there was one more Thing to come: On the final day of the conference, Cantina Mesa sponsored a Mediterranean-inspired buffet lunch for nearly 50 guests, where it showed off its entire range—not only the aforementioned Giunco, Buio, and Buio Buio but also the Primo Bianco Vermentino and Primo Scuro Cannonau. SMUSA wine educator Kristina Szazama spoke to the fresh and quaffable nature of the latter wines as well as to the unique terroir of the area of southern Sardinia known as Sulcis. Pointing out that this part of the island lies closer to the northern coast of Africa than it does to Rome, she described the influence of the near-constant winds on Sulcis: The north-to-south mistral, south-to-north scirocco, and east-to-west levante each play a role in keeping the vineyards dry and fresh. The attendees expressed keen enthusiasm about the fruit-forward brightness of the resulting wines.

Yes, our Things are back. We’re looking forward to the next one at SommCon San Diego in November! *sj*



Martha Bednarek, associate brand manager for SMUSA, presents Cantina Mesa’s Buio Carignano to Morgan Burton, district manager for SMUSA, and Devin Proch and Dee Duff, vanguard sales associates, on-premise, for RNDC.



Ca’ del Bosco’s Dosage Zéro was one of the wines served at the dinner.



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