

Pairing fine beers with fine food

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Let's call it our dinner with Jean-Pierre, as it was to be a voyage of discovery in the adventurous pairing of beer and food.

To my left was Walter Stratton, a wine expert and wine-lover of many decades who admitted to little affinity for beer.

To my right was Steve McMenamin, owner of Versailles, the Greenwich restaurant where Jean-Pierre Bagnato is executive chef. Stratton's son John, who has sought out unusual beers in his world travels, and Doug Perkins, an ardent beer-lover seeking new experiences, rounded out the panel.

Bagnato sat across the table, where he had access to Versailles' kitchen and the cooler behind the bar, the better to spring a host of surprises on us.

A master of colors, flavors and textures, who has won gastronomic acclaim in Hong Kong and New York City, Bagnato started out coy, popping the cap on a bottle of Kronenbourg 1664, an excellent example of the familiar pale lager style, which makes up about 90 percent of the beers served in the U.S.

Beer goes with peanuts, he noted. But this was neither the time nor place for crunching up roasted goobers and tossing the shells on the floor. Instead Bagnato had created a pate of fresh, spicy, peanut butter topped with a large dollop of avocado in which to dip our freshly baked, salty bread sticks.

The hoppy, pale lager was appropriate for the dish, but we were soon challenged with a richer, maltier Fischer, another beer from the Alsace region of France. Combined with the earthy spices of the pate, the sweet amber Fischer almost conveyed a peanut butter sandwich to the tongue, one of the least-expected sensory experiences I've ever had with a beer.

Bagnato allowed that with the high carbonation of the Fischer, "This is a little more difficult to pair with food," but a viable choice nonetheless, as was the Grolsch, a Dutch lager that followed. Each brew bore a different flavor profile, variously complementing and contrasting the dish.

Opinions evolved as we continued to sip the Fischer and Grolsch over an appetizer of four kinds of caviar over smoked salmon, with a rich fromage blanc. The two pale lagers still held their own, but the more tasty Fischer came out on top.



In making the pairings, he was seeking "the unity" of flavors, said Bagnato, taking into account the food's texture and the beer's mouthfeel. Soon the cuisine switched to Japanese fusion and a new experience for us all, a buckwheat beer, Soba Ale, from the Rogue brewery in Oregon. "I tried this beer before and I fell in love," said Bagnato of the dry, amber brew designed by Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto.

He served the Soba with a plate of tempura-style fried shrimp, accompanied by a mild wasabi sauce and a tasty cole slaw spiced with ginger and sesame.

All the time I was thinking "Buckwheat?!" -- but hey, it worked, as did the next round of beer and food. This was composed of Jenlain Printemps, an unfiltered, champagne-like, farmhouse ale from Brasserie Duyck in northern France, and the French staple of moules-frites, whose mussels were perfectly textured in a sauce with garlic and shallot.

John Stratton and McMenamin compared the Jenlain to a Riesling, noting the myriad differences this brew had from the buckwheat Soba and the earlier, German-styled Alsatian beers. "I like that sweetness. It goes with the sweetness of the shallots," McMenamin said.

"It has all the attributes of champagne," Walter Stratton said. "Two hours ago, I thought all beers tasted alike."

The next brews -- three of them -- were elegant, but far from gentle. Bagnato brought out the Chimay Trappist ales, brewed at an abbey in Belgium and regarded as among the world's most complex. He paired them with a filet of beef au poivre, the cracked peppercorns floating in a burgundy red sauce.

"My idea is that as you eat the beef, you go for a richer beer," Bagnato said, starting us off with Chimay Triple, labeled "Cinq cent" on the 750 ml bottle. Cloudy blond in color and poured with a rolling head, the Triple is a strong 8 percent alcohol with pronounced bitterness in the finish and meant to be drunk young.

As we savored the steak,

Bagnato next opened the Chimay Premiere, a malty, red-brown decoction with a sweet and sour balance that rounds out into a long, fruity aftertaste. And then he popped the Grande Reserve, a darker brew with caramel flavors and just a bit of roastiness, and a rich, full body.

We each lined up three glasses, going from light to dark, and deciding which went best with the beer. Our opinions varied, but we all found a Chimay to like as Bagnato closed out this feast of taste, texture and discovery.

"I'm impressed that there is such a variety, and such subtle differences," said wine-lover Walter Stratton, who found a lot to like in an evening of fine beers and fine food.

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