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TAKE IT OUTSIDE



*SUMMER'S THE SEASON FOR
ALFRESCO WINING AND DINING.*

STORY BY ALIA AKKAM





Wine, oysters and a spectacular setting for dinner at Front Porch Farm.



On the North Fork of Long Island, the winery at Paumanok Vineyards is a striking setting on any day, with a deck overlooking the towering green vines of Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Petit Verdot. But on one anticipated evening each summer, as it has for the past five years, the vineyard backdrop proves especially striking.

On these evenings, Charles Massoud and his wife Ursula—who own and run the winery with their three sons—welcome their nephew, Philippe Massoud, owner of the energetic Mediterranean restaurant and lounge Ilili in New York City. And each year, Philippe brings his sublime knack for vivid, aromatic Middle Eastern cooking, which he displays over the course of the evening to 150 guests seated at a single long table in the vineyard.

The feast may feature Philippe's grilled octopus with Lebanese salsa verde and citrus, charcoal-charred chicken with garlic whip, and white-chocolate rose pudding—along with the star of the meal, a juicy roasted lamb, slow-cooked and brightened with sumac and Aleppo pepper. As each course is served, Charles and Ursula demonstrate that the vineyard surroundings aren't just for show, as they pour wines ranging from Paumanok's semi-dry Riesling to the winery's beloved Festival Red, a blend of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. "The first year, we had to move it indoors because of sketchy weather," says Kareem Massoud, Paumanok's winemaker. "But now the dinner has become so popular that we have a tent provisionally reserved in case Mother Nature doesn't cooperate."

For the Massoud clan, inviting Philippe to make his culinary mark on the winery through a lively annual dinner was another way to emphasize Paumanok's ethos of family and camaraderie. "It's a wonderful way for us to combine what we do and who we are in a single event," Kareem says. "When you are in the vineyard, with great food and wine and a spectacular sunset, it's one of the best examples of if you do what you love, it's not work. It's also a great deal of fun."

A Short Trip From Farm to Table

Food, wine, a spectacular sunset and good company—all ingredients for a perfect summer evening. And every summer, more wineries like Paumanok are welcoming guests into their grassy vineyards, drawn not only by the verdant surroundings, but by memorable meals. Wine is food's natural match, and at these winery dinners, guests experience the relationship in an inimitable way—by enjoying dishes created by talented chefs and tasting them alongside wines that originated in the vineyards surrounding the table.

At Paumanok, the annual lamb roast proved so popular that the winery soon caught the attention of Outstanding in the Field, the Santa Cruz, California-based organization that organizes idyllic open-air repasts at farms and wineries across the country (and, increasingly, around the globe). Launched by artist Jim Denevan in 1999, OITF was conceived as a compelling way to spark dialogue about land and food among like-minded strangers over a portable alfresco



Chef Todd Knoll (opposite page, bottom left) picks fresh produce for a dinner with Jordan Winery, near Healdsburg, California.



Photos this spread: Matt Armendariz



table. In addition to its annual dinners with Philippe Massoud, Paumanok has collaborated on several OITF dinners in recent years, all in conjunction with Jason Weiner, the chef/proprietor of Almond in nearby Bridgehampton. “Seeing it come together, and how happy the guests are to eat and drink our wine—it’s all a great inspiration,” Kareem says.

When Denevan first unveiled Outstanding in the Field—the first event took place at Mariquita Farm, near Watsonville, California—the national food scene was at a different juncture. “The celebrity chef was cool, but other than a few people like Alice Waters, nobody really concerned themselves with ingredients or the farmers who grew them,” Denevan says.

But Denevan saw change coming, along with a growing curiosity of the culture surrounding food. Today, the 2015 OITF tour calendar is jammed from May to November with 87 events in 32 states plus British Columbia and Japan—many selling out almost instantly—reflecting the increasing appreciation for local, seasonal ingredients. This season, OITF has dinners planned in a range of scenic venues, including Front Porch Farm, which overlooks Sonoma’s Russian River, and Temecula Olive Oil Company in Riverside County.

Winery dinners began early on in OITF’s chronology, and Denevan says bringing OITF into vineyards was “an obvious decision.” This season has seen no slowing down: in mid-May, Preston Winery in Sonoma County’s Dry Creek Valley, near Healdsburg, served winemaker Matt Norelli’s wines alongside a meal from San Francisco chef Mark Liberman of AQ. Over Memorial Day weekend, Thomas McNaughton of San Francisco’s Flour + Water and Central Kitchen packed his chef’s tools to the Pinot Noir vineyards of Devil’s Gulch Ranch in Marin County. Chef Mark Sullivan of San Francisco’s Michelin-starred Spruce sated diners among the palm trees at Sonoma Valley’s Scribe Winery in late May, and in June, Chris Kobayahsi of Artisan in Paso Robles cooked at nearby Adelaida Cellars, the diners gathered in a vineyard that, even in summer, can have an evening chill thanks to the proximity of the Pacific Ocean.

This was the second year that Front Porch Farm, near Healdsburg, hosted an OITF dinner, which took place in mid-May. On a sunny Saturday, around 180 guests gathered at the farm for a meal prepared by chef Robin Song, from Hogs & Rocks in San Francisco, accompanied by two of the farm’s wines—a 2014 rosé of Grenache and Syrah, and a 2013 white blend of Grenache Blanc, Viognier and Marsanne-Roussanne. For general manager Johnny Wilson, the event offers a way to give guests a closer perspective on the farm’s wines. “When I was pouring wine at the reception, I was able to point people to the vines where the grapes were grown,” Wilson says. “Bringing people to the farm lets us really talk about our wine. We grow Rhone varietals,” a relative rarity in California, he says, “and any time we can get folks to the farm to talk about the diversity our sites have is a good thing.”

Wilson says the dinners are also perfect platforms for giving guests richer, longer-lasting relationships with the winery, and the wine, than they might otherwise experience. “When people step onto the farm, they have an immediate connection—they

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Bigtablefarm.com

JORDAN WINERY

Based in Healdsburg, California, Jordan organizes Sunset Suppers at scenic Vista Point.
Jordanwinery.com

OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD

Organizes events at farms and wineries across the country, and around the world.
Outstandinginthefield.com

PAUMANOK VINEYARDS

A Long Island-based winery that also organizes its own alfresco feasts.
Paumanok.com

see the beauty, they see the abundance, they see the vineyards,” he says. At this year’s dinner, Wilson says a couple paused before the meal at a scenic spot overlooking the vineyards, and became engaged. “That’s a story that’s going to stick in people’s memory—and it’s connected with our winery. You create connections with people who are going to be lifelong customers.”

Room at the Table

By blurring the boundary between a formal dinner and a casual picnic, these outdoor events manifest a few of summer’s finest points, and for the wineries hosting the meals, it’s a perfect opportunity to not only show off some of the favorite bottles from the cellar, but to give guests a better idea of what the winery—and the winemakers—are like.

This approach is on display at Big Table Farm, a winery in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, which in July will host Timothy Wastell, the former chef of Portland’s Firehouse. For winery owners Clare Carver and Brian Marcy—transplants from Napa Valley—it’s an ideal partnership. “We’re a working farm, so it’s like this beautiful sharing of what Brian and I do, and how we live. It’s an extension of our own table in an incredibly memorable setting,” Carver says. “We may not have a vineyard on the farm, but by the end of the night we’ve introduced over 100 people to our wines, who sipped it at a table facing a pastoral view of cows. It doesn’t get much better.”

Carver and Marcy moved to Oregon in 2006, and at the time, Marcy already had a decade of experience as a winemaker. The winery produces small amounts of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Riesling, all made on the 70-acre farm where the couple also raise cows, pigs and chickens. As the farm’s name implies, the couple saw a role for the dining experience early on, and while these dinners feature Big Table’s naturally fermented wines, such as the unfiltered and unfiltered Laughing Pig Rosé and Pelos Sandberg Pinot Noir, the wine isn’t the only thing the farm lends to the table. Long before each meal, Carver checks on the farm’s supply of eggs and honey, and its livestock. “Then I’ll call the chef, and we’ll go back and forth over the menu and create it,” Carver says. “One time, Jason French of [Portland restaurant] Ned Ludd did a meal here and he used our chickens to make a seasonal smoked salad with our own smoker—he’s been back to the farm to cook three dinners since.”

Looking beyond the obvious appeal of these dinners, the logistics can be formidable—there are permits that need approval and licensing requirements to fulfill, along with all of the work that goes into coordinating a meal for 100 or more guests. But red tape aside, Carver and Marcy find the outcome of these events so worthwhile that they are toying with the idea of hosting a series of smaller, more manageable dinners in the near future for their wine customers, especially since the annual harvest feasts they throw for the staff—what Carver deems “the most important meal of the year”—are such gorgeous productions.

Jordan Vineyard & Winery in Healdsburg is another regular host of such meals; on July 18 and again on August 1, the winery hosts one of its Sunset Suppers at the scenic setting of Vista Point. During Jordan’s summer feasts, chef Todd Knoll prepares a multi-course meal for 50 guests—using what winery CEO John Jordan says are “modernist-cooking techniques you’d expect to see in a formal dining room”—paired with Jordan’s Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. “Hosting Sunset Suppers at Vista Point is our way of sharing everything that makes Sonoma County so special—food, wine, mountains and nature—all in one place,” Jordan says.

For Denevan, such dinners are about much more than simple food and drink. “Terroir is a word you always hear when describing place, and a place can truly be expressed through the wines that are made there,” says Denevan. “The farmer, the person who works in the vineyard, has their own story about the grapes being harvested, too, and that is powerful. So when you put a table in the middle of that vineyard, and have access to a winemaker’s expression of a certain time and place, then it’s even more powerful because you are present.” ■

Katie Briggs from Outstanding in the Field brings on the salads at Front Porch Farm.

