

dining

Feast of tastes at Cornucopia

By Tim Pawsey

WHISTLER VILLAGE. Three days of no holds-barred, over-the-top gustatory adventure fills the time until the snow falls. Think Iron Chef meets WWE. This year's record attendance at Cornucopia this past weekend included *Bon Appétit's* Anthony Dias Blue and Food Network Canada's *Party Dish* Trish Magwood. Some highlights:

Benchmark

Naramata's "Hidden Wineries" came out swinging at gala Crush! The uppity Naramata Bench bunch had no problem drawing a crowd with tastes right out of the barrel. "We had planned to bring just one barrel between us for auction," said Ian Sutherland of elusive Poplar Grove. "But somehow it got out of control." (We sensed the midas touch of Blasted Church and Lotusland Maverick marketer Bernie Hadley Beaugard hard at work.)

In the line-up with him were Elephant Island, Hillside, La Frenz, Lake Breeze, Laughing Stock, Kettle Valley, and Nichol. These wineries are rapidly developing as B.C.'s most potent group of small producers. You don't get the chance to taste these wines at the best of times, let alone right out of the barrel.

Serious collectors should take note of wines like Lake Breeze's '03 Pinotage (the province's only planting) or Nichol's Reservare Liltimus, which is a meaty but smooth expression from the valley's oldest Syrah producer. They're all keepers, of course. In fact, you'll have to wait until 2006 to buy most (best go right to the winery), including Poplar Grove's perfect Merlot-based blend.

Champions of breakfast

There was little squawking about tasting champagne at 10 in the morning, especially when it's some of the best, with easygoing guru David Scholefield. Wondering what to stock for Christmas bubble? Here are a few hints.

- Toasty, creamy and surprisingly complex Charles Heidsieck Mis en Cave '98 is a lot of wine in the glass for its \$55 price tag. It was blended and cellared in 1998 by the late, great Daniel Thibault, one of the most ac-



(L-R) Kettle Valley Winery's Tim Watts, Jeff Martin of La Frenz and Alex Nichol of Nichol Vineyard rolled out the barrel for Crush!, one of the many sold-out events at last weekend's Cornucopia.

photo Tim Pawsey

complished blenders. (Scholefield says think Krug at a fraction of the price.) For a bigger splurge, Pol Roger Blanc de Blancs '96 (or any '96, if you can find them).

On the lower end, don't overlook B.C. sparklers like toasty Steller's Jay Brut '01 (\$24.99) or—not in this tasting—newly arrived Valdo Prosecco, a stylish Italian for the money, appletoned with good mouth feel and a soft and slightly fruity end. An easy sipper to celebrate. LDB \$18.99.

Faith in foie

Best over-the-top food and wine pairings of the festival? Bearfoot Bistro's Icon Dinner excelled with confit of Quebec foie gras with chanterelle and sage pizza (Leonetti Cellars 1994 Cab. Sauv, a superb wine with lingering chocolate and anise, a great vintage from one of Washington's premier producers); and seared weathervane scallop, braised veal cheek and wild mushroom ragout (Saintsbury Carneros Reserve '92 Pinot Noir, still bursting with ripe cherry and cedar

spice).

Over at Araxi's "Big Guns," James Walt (formerly of Blue Water) also showed a deft hand with a superb lobster "pot au feu," matched perfectly with Domaine de Beaugard's beguiling Boisrenard Blanc '01; and a trio of duck with Domaine Serene's satin smooth Evenstad Pinot Noir 2000.

Quick bites

Hottest table in town is at Après. Eric Vernice, who helped put Bearfoot on the map, makes marvellous tastes on small plates such as brandade of Alaskan black cod, lobster dumplings and pan-seared lamb chop with truffle and mushroom toast. At Val d'Isere, Chef Roland Pfaff has shifted down to a cozy, bustling brasserie serving great onion soup with chicken and barley, cassoulet and traditional bistro fare. (Super deal: three courses for \$29 to Nov. 24.) Across from the Fairmont Chateau Whistler, Bernard Cassavant is closing Chef Bernard's to reopen in time for ski season as Ciao-Thyme Bistro.