

Smoking eggplant transports you to the Ottoman Empire

Joyce Goldstein, Special to The Chronicle: Thursday, January 12, 2006

When I'm out shopping for wine, I rarely head directly to the Petite Sirah bins. This grape just hasn't been prominent on my radar screen. So it was really interesting to taste 30 Petite Sirahs. Would I embrace this varietal as one I want in my cellar? Would it work well with my food?

Petite Sirah, also known as Durif, is related to Syrah and Peloursin varieties, and increasingly rare in France today. It produces wine that is dark, fruity and somewhat peppery. Some Petite Sirahs we tasted were classically rustic, others a bit rough and overly tannic. Most were very fruity, a few were overripe and prune-like with higher alcohol. Some had a smoky quality, while others were subtly fragrant with spices like clove and allspice. In other words, they were all over the lot.

Going into the tasting I had a preconception that I'd like to cook lamb, but every time I took a sip of wine, I tasted beef. If Janet Fletcher hadn't done such a bang-up job in writing about brisket a few weeks ago in the Food section ("Homey braised brisket suits celebratory get-togethers," Dec. 21), I would have offered up one of my recipes for this much-loved pot roast. (If you clipped that brisket article, try one with the Petite Sirah of your choice. You will have a fine food and wine pairing.)

Since it wasn't going to be brisket, where would I go? A grilled pepper-rubbed steak wouldn't give you much of a recipe. A beef stew where the meat is braised in red wine -- in this case, Petite Sirah -- would be another choice. Add bacon or pancetta to play up the smoky quality and add some black pepper and cloves or cinnamon to the onions.

I had three fine candidates with this flavor profile. First was a Hungarian goulash which has bacon, paprika and tomatoes. The second was a Tuscan stew called *il peposso*, or the peppery one, with pancetta, tomatoes, red wine and lots of black pepper. The third was another favorite, the classic Roman *garofolato di manzo*, a beef stew scented with cloves.

I decided to be more adventurous. Maybe it was reading Turkish author Orhan Pamuk's novel "Snow" that subconsciously led me to my recipe. Turkish cuisine is largely unfamiliar to the American diner, but it is varied, sensual and delicious. I prepared a classic dish from the Ottoman Empire, *Hunkar Begendili Kofte*. *Kofte* are meatballs and *hunkar begendili*, which translates as "Sultan's Delight," is a rich, smoky eggplant puree. This dish was a great favorite of my customers back in the days of Square One.

The key is that the mild bitterness and smokiness of the eggplant balances the wine's tannins, while the subtly spiced meatballs echo the spices in the wine. The creaminess of the eggplant and the richness of the tomato sauce add contrasting texture to balance out the rustic quality of the wine.

For Joyce Goldstein's recipe, visit the SF Gate site at this URL:
<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/01/12/WIGPTGKRNN1.DTL>