

Mexican matches

Napa's Ceja family shows that wine is a winning complement to the smoke and spice of south-of-the-border cuisine

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Shrimp are marinating in cayenne and paprika. Serrano chiles are going under the knife for the sake of the guacamole. Longaniza sausage is giving up its fat in a frying pan. A feast of Mexican home cooking is in the works in the Ceja family's kitchen.

And there's not a margarita nor Dos Equis in sight.

This is, after all, Carneros in Napa Valley, where Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines are sprouting out under cloudy spring skies as far as the eye can see. Lined up on the table, ready to prove their mettle as pairings for the spice and smokiness of the meal, are Ceja Vineyards' elegant wines.

"The meal reflects our heritage – and it goes really well with our wines," says Amelia Ceja, the tiny dynamo at the center of her three-generation family wine business. "One can make wines that would pair well with every kind of food in the world.

"The wine must be balanced, and the acidity has to be there to stand up to any food style," she says, and gives the longaniza-laced Tortilla de Patatas an expert flip.

The proof is in the pudding – or in this case, in Amelia Ceja's multicourse menu. This is real Mexican cuisine, no Cal-Mex burritos and tacos, no Tex-Mex palate-killing macho heat, none of the foods that may keep Americans from looking beyond tequila and beer when they eat Mexican. Her dishes are simple. Ingredients are fresh. And spicing ranges from the subtle smoky warmth of Lima Beans with Chipotle to the sharp serrano bite of the guacamole.

The wines cover the range, too. Current Ceja releases are four varietals – Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Merlot (all from the Carneros region, which straddles Napa and Sonoma counties) and a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon – plus a Sonoma County Vino de Casa blend of Pinot Noir, Merlot and Syrah.

"Mouth-feel is what we try for. We want full, mature fruit – you want ripe, soft wines with spicy food. Astringent or bitter wine puts spicy food over the top," says Armando Ceja, the winemaker and Amelia's brother-in-law. To balance the fruit, he looks for just the right amount of acidity.



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Armando Ceja made his first wine in 1978 when he was 18 and a vineyard worker at Duckhorn vineyards. Duckhorn had some Cabernet Sauvignon grapes left over, and the wine he made from those turned out well. He's used the same approach since.

The Cejas have been making home wines from their own grapes since the mid- 1980s, and went into commercial production in 1998. Ceja wines tend to go against the current Napa craze for super-ripe fruit, overextracted wines and high alcohol.

Food Friendly

"That isn't our style. We want to keep it more food-friendly," Armando says, quickly adding: "But we also want to make wine that will lay down (age) nicely."

"The wines all share bright fruit and a finesse that, as Amelia points out, meshes well not just with Mexican cuisine but with all kinds of foods. Her contention is borne out by the variety of Bay Area restaurants carrying Ceja wines: from Tra Vigne in St. Helena to Sushi Ran in Sausalito, from Bistro Jeanty in Yountville to Cindy Pawlcyn's Backstreet Kitchen in St. Helena.

But we are here to investigate the almost heretical idea that wine goes very well with Mexican cuisine – and the Cejas are happy to try to convince us.

Their passion for food and wine runs deep. Both Armando's parents, the Cejas, and Amelia's, the Morans, were migrant workers who came from Mexico to work California's wine grape harvest – and picked the Napa Valley as the place to raise their families.

The kids all worked the vineyards while going to high school and college. Amelia married Armando's brother Pedro – there were 10 Ceja siblings. It was Ceja patriarch Pablo, a native of the Michoacan region, who bought their first 15 acres, in Carneros. Armando went off to UC Davis for an enology degree, got a job at Domaine Chandon and ran his own vineyard consulting business before the family got serious about selling its own wines. Everyone pitches in.

Now, the Cejas have 113 planted acres in Carneros, near Petaluma and along the Silverado Trail on the eastern side of Napa Valley. Pablo, soon to turn 70, still works the vineyards, and the two generations after him all help out. They make their wines at the MacRostie Winery in Sonoma, but hope to build their own facility soon. That would allow them to raise production from the current 3,600 annual cases. Now they use only about 8 percent of the grapes they grow and sell the rest.

From old country

Several of the dishes on Amelia's menu are the same ones she grew up with in her native village in Jalisco, cooked there over an open fire, with water hauled from the river.

"My grandmother made these lima beans, and my mother does them too," she says. "I was eating gourmet food all my life and I didn't know it.

"She works hard to make the case that wine is a natural with Mexican food. The first winery in the Americas, she points out, was started in Mexico more than 400 years ago – by Spaniards who planted grapes for sacramental wines. And real Mexican cuisine has close links to Spanish food, long considered more food-friendly.

But it will be up to the food and wine to make the best case, and we head out to the picnic table out back by the vineyard, where fava beans are blooming between rows of grapes. Amelia makes a point of not saying which wines she likes best with which foods, leaving it up to our palates.

First up: lightly grilled Hog Island oysters, with a splash of tomatillo salsa and a sprinkle of Parmesan. The 2000 Ceja Napa Carneros Chardonnay (\$30) is a natural for the oysters, crisp and minerally, without any buttery malolactic fermentation character and aged in new French oak barrels. Still, it will take more to convince us that a well-made Carneros wine is the perfect match for Mexican cooking.

A few minutes later, the sun dodges behind rain clouds and Amelia serves up the undeniable proof: Her cayenne- and paprika-laced Camarones con Cebollitas Rojas y Ajo (see recipe).

We reach for the 2001 Ceja Sonoma Carneros Pinot Noir (\$38) and the combination is a winner. The wine's silky finesse, with hints of hibiscus and tea, plays off the sweetness of the shrimp, while the fruit and acidity stand up to the spices' subtle heat and the squirt of lime. The black cherry flavors of the 1999 Ceja Sonoma Carneros Merlot (\$32) and 2001 Ceja Sonoma County Vino de Casa (\$18) work, too, but the Pinot pairing is the one that lingers.

The tannins in the 2000 Ceja Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$38) don't mesh with the shrimp, but they're magic with the smokiness of the next dish: Lima Beans with Chipotle Peppers and White Onions (see recipe). The Tortilla de Patatas, a dense Spanish-style tapa made with potatoes and eggs (see recipe), carries the flavor of longaniza, a milder sausage than chorizo. Here, the Chardonnay goes well, the crispness and fruit standing up to the spice. The Merlot livens the tortilla up with its earthy flavors and acidity.

By the time we get to the grilled skirt steak and vegetables, the big reds – Merlot and Cabernet – are perfect. Pile on the tomatillo salsa, though, and the fruitiness of the Merlot gets lost; the Cabernet shines through. Amelia Ceja, who brings the sales and marketing muscle to the family enterprise, thinks that making connections between fine wine and spicy cuisine will be a great boon to the wine industry as a whole.

"We need to demystify wine," she says. "Whatever your palate likes is what you should like."

Pedro Ceja, whose work as an engineer has kept things going while the family builds its wine business, says matching Mexican foods and with the right wines is like any wine and food pairing: You have to find elements that like each other and avoid ones that compete.

"Take a tannic Cabernet and try it with chile con carne. That is just not going to work in a million years," he says. The tannins and heat clash. But the same Cab will dazzle with carne asada and tortillas.

"We use a lot of lime, which can work wonders with the acid in the Chardonnay," he says. "And the Chardonnay cuts through the spiciness."

"After years of experimenting, of fooling around with that, I think we have identified certain techniques and pairings that work wonderfully."

Lima Beans with Chipotle Peppers

INGREDIENTS

- 1 pound dried baby lima beans

- 1 head of garlic
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1/2 sweet white onion, thinly sliced
- 2 canned chipotle peppers in adobo sauce + 1 tablespoon of sauce
- Salt

INSTRUCTIONS

Place limas in a glass bowl, sort them, and discard any unwanted matter such as small pebbles or dirt. Run cool tap water into bowl, swishing beans around with your fingers, until water runs clear. Drain.

Bring 10 cups of water to a boil in a large pot. Remove loose papery husk from head of garlic, then cut off enough of top of bulb to reveal garlic cloves. Rinse thoroughly. Add limas and garlic to boiling water. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer until limas are just tender, about 1 1/2 hours. Check periodically and stir, adding more water as needed (there should be twice as much liquid as beans at all times). When beans are done, remove from heat.

While beans are cooking, heat oil in a large nonstick pot over medium heat. Add onion and cook for 10 minutes, stirring frequently. Add chipotle peppers and adobo sauce. Cook for 3 minutes longer.

Discard garlic. Add beans with all their liquid to onion. Bring to a gentle boil. Season with salt to taste. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 to 30 minutes. Do not stir too much or starch in beans will thicken broth. Serve in small bowls. Serves 12.

PER SERVING: 150 calories, 7 g protein, 22 g carbohydrate, 4 g fat (1 g saturated), 0 cholesterol, 231 mg sodium, 7 g fiber.

Tortilla de Patatas (Potato Omelet)

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 pound Mexican longaniza, casings removed (see Note)
- 5 medium-size russet potatoes
- 1 large onion, chopped
- Salt Extra virgin light olive oil
- 5 eggs

Note: Longaniza is a spicy Mexican sausage; lightly sautéed asparagus tips may be substituted.

INSTRUCTIONS

Cut sausage into small pieces and cook in a skillet over low heat for 25 minutes. Drain and set aside.

Peel potatoes and cut each into 6 lengthwise wedges. Slice each wedge crosswise into thin triangles. Combine potatoes and onion, season with salt and toss to combine.

Heat 1/2 inch of olive oil in a medium-size skillet over medium heat. (Don't cut down on amount of oil; use enough to completely cover potatoes.) Add potato mixture and cook, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking, until potatoes are tender. Drain off excess oil (almost all oil drains off; see note at end of analysis). Lightly beat eggs in a bowl, then add potato mixture, sausage and salt to taste.



Place a medium-size nonstick skillet over medium heat. When pan is hot, add 1 tablespoon olive oil. When oil is hot, add egg-potato mixture. Cook, stirring until eggs are almost set, then stop stirring and let eggs set. Invert a plate (slightly larger than pan) over pan, then holding pan and plate together (use oven mitts), invert. Tortilla will land upside down on plate. Slide tortilla back into skillet, uncooked side down, and cook for 3 to 4 minutes longer. Return tortilla to plate. May be served hot, warm or at room temperature. Serves 12.

Note: Look for longaniza in Latino markets or in Mexican foods section of supermarkets.

PER SERVING: 185 calories, 9 g protein, 10 g carbohydrate, 13 g fat (4 g saturated), 105 mg cholesterol, 260 mg sodium, 1 g fiber. It is difficult to estimate how much oil potatoes will absorb. Variables include variety of potato used, age of potatoes, oil temperature and cooking time. This analysis includes 2 tablespoons of absorbed oil.

Camarones con Cebollitas Rojas y Ajo (Shrimp with Shallots & Garlic)

INGREDIENTS

- 3 pounds unpeeled shrimp (16-20 shrimp per pound)
- 8 firm shallots, peeled and thinly sliced crosswise
- 8 garlic cloves, peeled and thinly sliced crosswise
- 1/3 cup + 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1/2 lime

INSTRUCTIONS

Rinse shrimp in ice-water. Pat dry with paper towels. Using a small serrated knife, cut each shrimp in half lengthwise (do not peel them). Tip: Put shrimp in front of you on a cutting board with its back facing your right hand (if you are right-handed). Hold shrimp in place by putting your fingers flat on top of it. Then, carefully start sawing through it with serrated knife. Transfer to a nonreactive bowl.

Mix together shallots, garlic, 1/3 cup olive oil and salt. Add to shrimp and stir until they are completely coated. Sprinkle on cayenne and paprika and mix well. Refrigerate for 1 hour.

Heat 2 tablespoons olive oil in a large nonstick skillet. When oil is very hot, but not smoking, add shrimp and sauté until they just turn pink, about 3 minutes. Squeeze in lime juice, stir and serve immediately. Serves 8.

PER SERVING: 300 calories, 29 g protein, 10 g carbohydrate, 15 g fat (2 g saturated), 209 mg cholesterol, 500 mg sodium, 0 fiber.