

Feast of the Senses

Amelia Ceja of Ceja Vineyards proves that teamwork, timing and a tipples along the way are the keys to throwing a memorable holiday party.

By Risa Wyatt, Photos by Victoria Yee, Wine Enthusiast Magazine - Issue: Best of Year 2007

There is probably no more compelling seasonal image than a festively decorated table groaning under an array of food and wine and ringed with upbeat revelers. The holidays typically take center stage for any gourmand worthy of the title; it's an opportunity to bring family and friends together for a show-stopping array of special dishes and coveted sips from the cellar.



Great hosts know that the key to pulling off a big holiday party is planning: When the parts are in place in advance, both the hosts and guests can enjoy the evening without feeling pressured. But teamwork is equally important, and creates a community bond that invests everyone in the event.

No one knows this better than Amelia Ceja, president of Napa Valley's Ceja Vineyards since 1999. Named Entrepreneur of the Year by Inc Magazine in 2004 and honored as Woman of the Year by the California State Legislature in 2005, Ceja is also a party hostess powerhouse whose culinary prowess is legendary in wine country and beyond. She is currently developing a TV show that focuses on cooking, culture and the arts. Whether throwing an intimate party for wine club members or celebrating the holidays in grand style with her three-generation brood, Ceja is all about planning, but also having fun and being in the moment.

Case in point: A recent Ceja family holiday gathering. Inside is the choreographed chaos that characterizes a kitchen on countdown for a big party. This one involves six simmering stovetop burners and three generations of the Ceja (pronounced SAY-ha) family—amplified by miscellaneous friends who have become like family—in the process of slicing, dicing, puréeing, and sautéing. The scene resembles a cross between an elimination round on Top Chef and a NASA launch. At the vortex stands a petite, dark-haired woman calmly stirring eggs and potatoes in a skillet, soft yellow curds that will ultimately solidify into delicious destiny as a Spanish tortilla de patata (potato omelette).

“This is action . . .this is real . . .this is where the magic begins,” says Amelia, smiling. “Are you ready for a glass of wine?” Hardly the words of a harried hostess.

Entertaining wines with everyday life for the Cejas, Mexican-Americans who in one generation have blossomed from migrant vineyard workers to major vintners in the Napa Valley. In 1983, the Cejas pooled their resources and bought 15 acres that they planted with Pinot Noir; today, they own 113 planted acres in Napa and Sonoma counties that produce 9,000 cases of wine annually. Frequent parties are thrown in the renovated 90-year-old cottage on the vineyard property, and in keeping with the Ceja *nuestra casa es su casa*—“our house is your house”—tradition, the stucco villa looks more like a home than a tasting room. At its heart, the largest space holds not the tasting room, but the dining area and granite-countered kitchen.

Plan and prepare ahead with teamwork

The first secret to Amelia's seemingly seamless parties is that the preparation is part of the party—not backstage. Family and friends mingle as they cook and then linger over dinner. "I love to invite the entire family to be part of the cooking; we all get to hang out together," Amelia comments. "It's a great opportunity to find out what's new with each other." For the holiday party preparation, everyone is at work: making quesadillas and whiz-washing pots; chopping pasilla peppers for the green rice; searing lamb shanks—the room is humming with conversation and the clang and clank of a working kitchen.



Effortlessly, Amelia manages to chat and finish the mussel broth with an ample pour of Pinot Noir ("Of course I use the good stuff.") She also supervises the entire prep group. How can a host do so many things at one time? "I only think about one thing at a time but I know what needs to happen in the future. Besides," she grins, "When I wanted tortillas as a kid, I first had to go out, pick corn, and then grind it myself. For me now, cooking is easy."

One by one each dish for this evening's dinner gets prepped and ready. By 5 p.m., calm and cleanliness reign in the kitchen. Amelia whips off her apron (pristine and unstained after a three-hour cooking spree) another timesaving strategy and stands fresh and elegant in a beige satin suit.



Simple, personalized décor as a food and wine backdrop

The décor is simple but captures the spirit of the season: The tablecloth, with its bronze-gauze overlay, echoes the grapevines outside that are shedding russet leaves before their winter nap. Deep-red in color—the hue recalls Cabernet Sauvignon—the napkins are woven with names of California varieties and appellations. "I bought the fabrics and had a seamstress make the tablecloth and napkins. I couldn't find anything like them already made up in stores," says Amelia, emphasizing another key to a stylish holiday party—personal touches.

The simplicity of the setting also showcases the food and wine. Each place setting holds a white plate nested on a golden charger. "White plates make the food pop," Amelia adds. "These are from Dudson, a restaurant supply company. They're strong—they can go in the dishwasher." (Post-party plus.) To the floral centerpieces featuring white mums and snowberries, Amelia has added olive-tree branches and the last red roses from her garden.

In keeping with Mexican tradition, Christmas celebrations remain simple, "For me Christmas is about having all my kids and their kids gather at my house and sharing meals with our friends," says Juanita Ceja, Amelia's mother-in-law.

Conversation is key

The Ceja immediate family—parents, siblings and spouses, children and grandchildren—numbers nearly 50 people. This particular dinner brings together eight Cejas plus two outside visitors. As you would expect from a family of vintners in the Napa Valley, much of the conversation focuses on wine—the growing, making and drinking thereof.

"At these family dinners we get to enjoy the literal fruits of our labors—our wines," says Armando Ceja, Amelia's brother-in-law and the winemaker, who was up before dawn to oversee the harvest of Cabernet Sauvignon.

“We’re a family—we should be passionate about what we do. And for us Cejas, that means our wine,” adds Ariel, Amelia’s son.

In the kitchen, the community effort continues as family members wrangle about who gets to cook the spicy shrimp. Amelia’s daughter Dalia wins stovetop dominance, but cousin Ariel insists on splashing some white wine into the skillet. As she sautés the shrimp, Dalia remarks, “I’ve been helping my mother and grandmother cook ever since I was little. I started when I was about five as ‘the mixing person’—my mom stood me on a stool so I could reach the counter.” Amelia looks at her and then gazes at Mama Juanita, (as her family calls her) who is grilling quesadillas. “Look what a beautiful circle cooking makes . . . here we have three generations in the kitchen.”



Pay attention to the pairings, but don’t obsess

At last it’s time for the meal. Counterpoised by tomato broth studded with longaniza (a Mexican sausage similar to Portuguese linguica) the mussels reveal sweet succulence—especially when paired with the same Ceja Pinot Noir that enriches the sauce. With layers of Oaxacan string cheese, sautéed mushrooms and fresh baby arugula, the quesadillas convey lush earthiness. Guests return to the kitchen to admire as Amelia serves out the cilantro-infused rice and lamb shanks—so tender that the meat swoons off the bones. The seasonings—a mix of smokiness and piquant spice—balance the flavors of rhubarb and white pepper in the 2004 Ceja Syrah. Next Amelia serves a simple medley of Marcona almonds, fresh figs and Stilton cheese along with the late harvest Dolce Beso dessert wine that entices with intense flavors of apricot and tropical fruit. Somehow everyone finds room to eat and drink.

“Wine exploration is an intimate sensual experience,” Amelia says. “People should drink whatever pleases their palates. We all experience our senses differently—why should some supposed expert tell you what you should like or dislike?”

People are paramount

The evening draws to a close. “Food speaks of where it comes from. Every dish we ate today was touched by the nicest people you’ll ever meet,” says Amelia, who has managed to keep her eye on the prize and focus more on the people at her party than worrying about every logistic. It’s the little details, not the compulsive ones, that can catapult a holiday gathering from standard to truly special. It’s how Juanita added a bit of her special sauce to each enchilada. The heirloom tomatoes in the lamb were picked by Amelia’s husband Pedro—the last ones from our garden. A dish or a wine becomes even more magical when you realize who has made it.

“Entertaining is so simple: Just open the door to your house and your heart,” Amelia concludes, “and allow people to come in.”