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Bubbling Over With *Excitement*

**CHAMPAGNE LOUIS ROEDERER UNVEILS THE
2015 VINTAGE OF CRISTAL IN SAN DIEGO**

story by Michelle M. Metter / photos by Rafael Peterson

WHEN YOU GET an invitation to taste the newest release of Champagne Louis Roederer's Cristal at one of San Diego's most talked-about restaurants, you change all your plans, find a babysitter, and RSVP immediately. I for one couldn't say no to the opportunity to enjoy bubbles, shared plates, and conversation with some of the city's top beverage buyers on a sunny evening at Wolf in the Woods last June.

Inspired by the culture of New Mexico, Wolf in the Woods blends Native American, European, and Hispanic influences on both its menu of small plates and in the interior of its dining room, decorated with folk art. It's an aesthetic that embraces you from the moment you walk in the door, and the sense of intimacy it has so effortlessly created made it the perfect backdrop for the launch of the 2015 vintage of Cristal.

That year, explained event co-host Xavier Barlier, senior VP of marketing and communications for Roederer importer Maisons Marques & Domaines USA, was an extraordinary one in



Maisons Marques & Domaines USA senior VP of marketing and communications Xavier Barlier (right) with district manager Jana Lemersal.



Louis Roederer Champagnes were paired with maize, hen of the woods mushrooms, and summer truffle, among other dishes.

which the Champagne region was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In keeping with the continental trend of the decade, it was marked by a mild, wet winter and a hot, dry summer that saw record-breaking temperatures and water stress until the second half of August when rain brought relief to the vines, which ultimately produced juicy, ripe, and concentrated grapes.

Cristal hails from sustainably worked vineyard plots that have been built up since 1845. In a rare occurrence not seen since 2002, the 2015 version was sourced from all 45 20-plus-year-old plots eligible for inclusion in the blend of this iconic cuvée. According to the official tasting notes, the result possesses "a deep yellow hue [and] includes ultra-fine, dynamic bubbles with an intense, concentrated bouquet of yellow fruit (white peach, Mirabelle plum) [plus] a concentrated toastiness in the form of roasted hazelnut and almond aromas." For me, the texturally vibrant blend of 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Chardonnay conjured orange blossom and citrus as well as stone fruit and floral aromas; it's ready to drink now, though I'd like to revisit it in a year or two to see how it's developing.

Joining Barlier at the tasting was Jana Lemersal, district manager for Maisons Marques & Domaines USA; together they introduced the Cristal 2014 Rosé. Pink-



Wolf in the Woods owner Johnny Rivera and executive chef Carmine Lopez.

hued with slightly coppery tints, the blend of 55% Pinot Noir and 45% Chardonnay with a dosage of 7 grams per liter was expressive of trim, ripe fruit. The winemaking team uses a unique method they refer to as "infusing," which allows them to extract the ripe character of the Pinot Noir while preserving freshness: Small amounts of Chardonnay juice are added to the Pinot Noir maceration prior to fermentation.

Wolf in the Woods executive chef Carmine Lopez, who leads the kitchen for the restaurant owned by Johnny Rivera, prepared a special menu for the evening. Designed to spark conversation at the table, the first course of Maine lobster was presented for sharing. Combining stone fruit, mixed greens, candied pecans, rosemary focaccia croutons, pickled onion, and fennel-pollen goat cheese, the dish was a stellar match for the Louis Roederer 2015 Philippe Starck Brut Nature from Reims, whose aromas of ripe fruit, citrus peel, and vanilla complemented the New Mexican lavender vinaigrette accenting the lobster.

Not to be outdone, the intermediary course of maize, hen of the woods mushrooms, and summer truffles is one of my favorite dishes at Wolf in the Woods (if you go, order it—you won't regret it). It's based on creamy polenta that's blended with mascarpone and pecorino and topped with sundried-tomato drizzle,

a fresh quail egg, and locally sourced watercress. Blackened opah with New Mexican Hatch red chile, bone marrow jus, smoked Bordeaux trout roe, crème fraîche, and smashed potatoes followed, aptly paired with the 2015 Cristal.

The meal wrapped up in spectacular fashion with the presentation of a sparkler-topped cake flavored with elderflower and summer citrus, which was fitting for such a fête: By the end of the evening, we attendees felt like we were celebrating the formation of new friendships as much as the release of the latest vintage of Cristal. *SJ*



Citrus-elderflower cake capped off the celebratory event.