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Digesting the Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit

By Wes Marshall

Every year during a late-April weekend, Tom and Lisa Perini throw one of the best parties in Texas with the Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit. Tom is internationally known for his chuck-wagon cooking and his tender-as-butter beef tenderloin, but he's better known in the Abilene area for Perini's Steakhouse in the tiny town of Buffalo Gap. If things keep going the way they are, the Summit is what will make the couple famous.

This year's gathering was the best so far, and a good deal of the glory goes to guest chef Stephan Pyles and his pastry chef Katherine Clapner. Instead of doing a star turn and disappearing as soon as his event finished, Pyles came for the entire festival. He started on the first night with a slam down with Tom Perini called a Collision of Flavor and Style and stayed through the last customers on Saturday night.

The highlight was Pyles' Saturday lunch. All events at the Summit are al fresco, and the weather helped by being delightful. We were seated in a beautiful white tent at eight-top tables with white tablecloths and napkins. The opening flurry of fancy food was Ceviche of Lobster With Vanilla-Roasted Fennel, Almond Gazpacho, and Frozen Champagne Grapes. Next up were Pineapple-Pecan Empanada With Foie Gras Mousse and Cardamom-Scented Spit-Roasted Suckling Pig. Pyles' last dish was Barbecued Beef Short Rib With Tamal Criollo and Dried Cherry-Chipotle Salsita. Former Austinite Clapner made a Frozen Guanabana-Passion Fruit Soufflé With Vanilla Bean Panna Cotta and Prickly Pear Ravioli. Besides being gorgeous, this dish covered all the bases with sour prickly pear, rich soufflé, and mellow panna cotta.

After all of that work, the duo came back for the least glamorous event – at least for the chefs – the Saturday night walk-around. This is the event where chefs and wineries offer their best. Polling the other media folks there, the consensus was that chef Matt Martinez Jr. carried the night with his dish that takes longer to say than to eat: Mini Jalapeño Corn Bread Cakes Laid to Rest on Top of Zesty Chile Con Queso and Topped With Smoked Brisket, Wild Boar Sausage, Sweet Peppers, Onions, Fresh Mushrooms. That's a mouthful in more ways than one.

One other event merits mention: my own Texas vs. the World Wine Tasting. As usual, when I'm leading a wine tasting, we put every wine in a bag so that no one – including the panel or me – would know what we are tasting. Then, to keep everyone honest, we use mystery ringers from other countries in every flight. The panel included a dozen winemakers, a master sommelier, and myself. Flights were tasted and voted on before uncloaking. This year, I asked the Perinis to provide a very rare and expensive ringer for the Viognier flight. I have written and said many times that Texas Viognier could stand with the best in the world. I wanted to see if that would prove to be true, and this group of professionals and consumers provided the perfect forum. So we added the gold standard, a French wine

from Condrieu, one that costs four times as much as the Texas versions and is so rare that the state is allocated only 10 cases allocation annually. When all the votes had been tabulated for the four-wine flight, Texas Viogniers finished in the top three spots for both the experts and the audience. Bravo to Brennan Vineyards, Becker Vineyards, and McPherson Cellars.

Throughout the three days of the Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit, happy faces were all I saw. Several people commented that they thought it was a bargain at the price (\$375 for an all-event pass). One fellow from Stonewall approached me at the Saturday night event, moved in close, grabbed my arm, and said, "If I get to heaven and it's just like this, I'm gonna be a happy man."

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