

This past Monday a group of us gathered at Jimmy's to celebrate Mardi Gras and have some special New Orleans cuisine. With actual Fat Tuesday only a few days away, it was a good reason to have some fine eats and mighty nice wines.

After sharing some glasses of Chardonnay we settled down to the first course of our feast. It was sweetbreads with mushrooms and potatoes. The Yukon gold potatoes were simmered in stock, the mushrooms were sautéed with garlic and thyme, and the sweetbreads were gently fried in butter until slightly crisp on the outside. Everything was sauced with a Creole mustard spiked cream.

What a combination. It proved to be very popular. The shapes were similar but the tastes and flavors stood apart. The mustard tied it all together.

Sweetbreads are a little difficult to deal with. They have lots of connective tissue that must be removed or they will be tough and chewy. Their mild flavor and great texture make them unique and very good. I think my server Keegan got it right when he said they had the taste of chicken and the texture of an oyster.

Our wine was Spruce Goose Pinot Noir. This fruity red mid-weight wine was perfect for the course. This wine is modest in cost and can be found easily.

The next course was oyster stew. Onion, celery and garlic were simmered in butter and then seasoned. Milk and cream were added along with the oyster liquid and a little light roux. The oysters were cooked separately and added to the bowls at service.

This was a rich soup that was very satisfying. It looked great with the oysters peeping out of the parsley-strewn liquid.

The wine was a white from Hayman and Hill called Interchange. It is a blend of mostly Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Four other whites make up the other 20 percent to produce a very pleasant wine that goes well with food.

Course number three was a New Orleans classic: WOP salad. You used to see this dish all over town. It's basically an Italian or Greek style

salad that gets its olives from the olive salad so popular in New Orleans. Ours had a shrimp and anchovy on top and was garnished with Parmesan.

Wine for a salad like this can be tough. We had Broadbent Vinho Verde from Portugal. It was so nice with the salad. Its bright fruit and firm edge made for great drinking.

Vinho Verde or green wine gets its name from its youthful character. It's inexpensive and is perfect for spring and summer drinking outdoors.

The main course was Pompano. This fish is very popular in New Orleans and rightfully so. It is one of the world's great fishes.

Pompano is a strong, muscular fish that is bright silver. If you have ever had an aquarium, you probably had silver dollar fish. A pompano is a big version of that. At 1 to 2 ½ pounds a fish will feed 2 to 4. Saltwater fly fishers seek after its larger cousin, the permit. They run in the flats and are great fun to catch.

The hard bones and strong skin of pompano yield as tender a fish as you will find. The flesh is butter-like in its feel and taste. The skin is so soft you don't know it's there.

Our pompano was baked in a pouch and seasoned with herbs, garlic, wine and olive oil. It was truly an outstanding treat. Don't miss this fish when you see it on a menu. We carry it at Jimmy's when we are fortunate to get some.

The wine we had was a stretch. It was a Zinfandel from the STG winery in Sonoma county, California. The rich soft flavor of the wine worked so well with the fish. This proves out that red wine and fish is OK.

The popular New Orleans chef and restaurateur Frank Brightsen does a dessert that uses elements of two favorites – bread pudding and Bananas Foster. Ours was a version of that idea.

Bread pudding made with bananas was dropped hot into a pool of caramel sauce like the one we use for bread pudding. Then the pudding was topped with a sauce made from brown sugar, butter, pecans, cinnamon and rum, like the one for bananas Foster.

Boy was that good. The warm soft pudding with the rich under sauce and crunchy one on top were great together. Yes it was sweet but not overly so. It made for a perfect New Orleans style dessert.

We shared a sparkling wine: Charmeroy. The bubbles are frothy and the flavor mild. It's dry but not too much. It worked great with the dessert. Something sweet would have been too much.

Charmeroy is inexpensive and fun to drink. You can pour it at a party and your guests will really enjoy it.

Having food from a particular location is a great way to visit it again or the first time without leaving home. Take the time to read some food and travel articles and try some of the dishes. If you don't want to go that far, ask your favorite chef to create that trip for you. You can have the food and invite friends along that might not be available to travel somewhere.

Food, wine and friends are a treat in themselves. Don't miss any chance you get to savor the experience.