

The theme of the special dinner at Jimmy's this month was lamb. No meat better fits spring than lamb. Its wonderful rich flavor and brilliant color are so exciting. It certainly brings us out of winter's gloom and puts us on the way to an invigorating year.

People will say, "I don't like lamb." When asked why, they will allude to a "game-like" taste. If you ask them when they tried lamb last, they can't remember. Ask how it was prepared and you find out it was an over-cooked chop.

No wonder they didn't like it. Lamb has many variations that allow a diner to choose a road to travel. In other words – all lamb is not alike.

My friend Joe Hippely at The Warehouse Bistro serves a great rack of lamb. We serve lamb at Jimmy's occasionally as a chef's feature. It is always very popular.

Recently I asked regular attendees at our monthly special dinners to vote on what they wanted to have this year. Lamb was a big vote getter. Since I like lamb anyway, I set out to share some different approaches to the preparation and serving of this wonderful meat.

After sharing glasses of Chardonnay and meeting a couple of new guests, we sat in anticipation of our first course. Soon the dining room was filled a rich aroma. Yes, lamb was to blame.

Ground lamb mixed with chunks of Feta and chopped fresh mint was formed into patties and quickly sautéed. A relish made from apples, red pepper and grapes that were simmered in vinegar and sugar spiked with Cayenne was served along side.

This was a great combination showing the versatility of lamb. The flavor combination was excellent. As one guest said, "This is the best sausage I've ever had." Several people told me we ought to serve a larger version as a burger at Saturday lunch. I think I'll give that a try.

Our first wine was Flying Monkey Syrah from the Purple Pig Winery in Monterey County, CA. This blend of 75% Syrah and 25% Cabernet is soft, fruity and has plenty of spice. It is a great weight for spring and summer. You can drink this wine with most any food you like red wine with and be very happy

How did it get its name? Here's what the winery says, "Flying monkeys, purple pigs, wild boar, vine-pruning munchkins, poppies and zeppelins are sometimes seen around the vineyard, particularly after an extended picnic." I'm so sure what they had at that picnic.

On the subject of why the monkey is red, they say – "After the Wicked Witch melted, he broke into her wine cellar." Bet you didn't know that.

Our second course took a turn away from lamb. We had lobster and crab bisque. This was a no cream version of rich stock full of pieces of lobster tail and lump crab. It was mighty good.

The wine was Red Zeppelin Chardonnay. This is an un-oaked version from Santa Barbara County. It has a little Viognier added for aroma and lushness. It is an excellent California Chardonnay that has a nice butter and vanilla edge even without the use of oak aging.

The third course took us back to lamb again. This time the dish was Suleiman's pilaf. I have made this dish for years and always marvel at how good it is.

The renowned English food writer, Elizabeth David, said of Suleiman's pilaf, "This is one of the most comforting dishes imaginable." She got it dead right.

Pieces of lamb shoulder are simmered for a couple of hours in stock seasoned with onions, garlic and tomato. Cinnamon is the key spice to making this rich stew. Dried apricots are added along the way and sliced almonds. The result is spectacular.

This dish can be made with beef, pork or chicken. It won't be as rich or smell quite as good. But it is worth trying. Serve like we did over Basmati rice and a spoon of yogurt on the side.

A white wine was served to help balance the evening. Two more reds were coming soon. This time it was Dry Creek Chenin Blanc. This was a nice wine with plenty of acidity to cut the sweet edge of the pilaf.

The main dish was a grilled lamb loin chop. A thick lamb chop is probably the best grilled meat you will ever eat. Cut 2 inches thick and cooked medium rare and seasoned with salt and pepper, they are outstanding.

Our chops were served with a tomato stuffed with basil-scented couscous and steamed haricot vert. The crisp beans set off the lamb very well.

A Bordeaux – Chateau Rocher-Lideyre was our wine. This classic blend was perfect with the lamb. It was a little dry and hard alone but the food made it just right.

Our dessert was a Tiramisu and chocolate truffle. I had a little extra time on Monday afternoon so I made a batch of chocolate truffles. It is basically a labor of love but it sure does make for mighty good treats.

With the chocolate goodies we had a Thomas Halby Cabernet Sauvignon. This excellent and reasonably priced California Cab is very good. I'll bet my friends Rick, Gus or Christine can get it for you.

All in all our lamb journey was a good one. Judging from all the empty plates, I think the food was well enjoyed.

Give lamb a try. Let a chef cook it for you. Tell one what you like and don't and then go for it. I think you will be surprised how good this rich meat really is.

And whatever you do make sure to try Suleiman's pilaf. Make it with any meat and be prepared for a real treat.

Next month we travel to South America for our special dinner. There's always room for a few more on our food and wine journeys.