

cooking and entertaining

BANFI VINTNERS

A Tasting of Italian Wines

WRITER JENNIFER CHANDLER
PHOTOGRAPHER JAY ADKINS



W

When The Victor L. Robilio Company, one of Memphis' largest wine distributors, learned that James Mariani was coming to Memphis, they knew they had to make the most of his visit.

Mariani is the third generation of family leadership of the leading wine importer of the United States. Founded by his grandfather in 1919, Banfi Vintners is an international wine marketer that primarily imports wines from Italy, Chile and Australia. The Mariani family also founded Castello Banfi, a vineyard estate in Montalcino, Tuscany, which produces award-winning wines that are exported to more than 85 countries around the world.

The last time a Mariani, James' father, was in Memphis was 30 years ago. "This visit is long overdue," says Mariani. "It's my first trip to Tennessee, and it is truly an honor to be welcomed by a group with life-long enthusiasm for the art of oenology."

This group he was referring to is the local chapter of Chaîne des Rôtisseurs. The Chaîne des Rôtisseurs is an international gastronomic society founded in Paris in 1950. With members in more than 70 countries worldwide, it is devoted to promoting fine dining and preserving the camaraderie and pleasures of the table.

Marne Anderson, general sales manager of Robilio, knew that this group would be the perfect audience for Mariani to share his family's wines. "Castello Banfi has such a large portfolio of wines," explains Anderson. "The wines we chose to highlight at the Chaîne dinner were a good overall representation of what they are making."

Prior to dinner, Anderson made sure that Mariani met as many in the local food and wine industry as possible. First on the agenda was a lunch at Interim, where the Robilio management and sales team had the opportunity to visit with Mariani as well as taste a selection of his wines. Next was a tasting of Banfi Vintners' portfolio of Italian wines, which includes both the Castello Banfi selection as well as wines from numerous other Italian wineries, for all of Robilio's retail customers. At this one-of-a-kind event, wine store and restaurant buyers had the rare opportunity to taste wines as well as discuss them firsthand with the importer.

Known as some of Memphis' most avid wine enthusiasts, the members of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs were honored to be hosts of this special wine dinner. "We are always excited when the owners of a winery come to Memphis and plan a dinner around their best wines," says Tom Cassidy, president of Cassidy Fine Foods and American Seafood and member of the national board of directors for the Chaîne.

As guests arrived at Erling Jensen, they were treated to passed hors d'oeuvres of scallops over polenta and tartlets of lamb with sun-dried tomato tapenade perfectly paired with Castello Banfi's Principessa Perlante 2006. The Perlante is a unique white wine made from 100 percent Cortese grapes. With a crisp citric finish, the wine's natural effervescence gives it a lift and excitement to help cool and soothe the palate.

While awaiting the first of many delectable courses Erling Jensen and his sous-chef Karen Roth would prepare, Mariani took a moment to share the story of his family's business.

Maraini's grandfather, John Mariani, Sr., was the first American-born member of his family. Through a twist of fate, Mr. Mariani found himself exposed to Europe's fine wine offerings early in life. When he was 9 years old, his father, a carriagemaker, died. Financial circumstances then forced his mother to return to Italy with him and five siblings. They resided with her sister, Teodolinda Banfi, who, albeit unwittingly, planted the seeds for her nephew's future choice of career. At the time, she was serving as chief of the household staff of the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, Achille Ratti, a position she continued to enjoy when he was elected Pope Pius XI in 1922. It seems that among her duties was the selection of the Pontiff's wines, decisions that invariably proved a topic of conversation at the Banfi table. Her choices—and the reasons for them—did not escape her nephew's attention. In 1919, Mr. Mariani founded Banfi Products Corporation, which he named after his aunt. His sincere desire to bring the European pleasures of the table to America enabled Mariani to build a business that would be ranked the leading wine importer in the United States for the past 30 years as well as the single largest producer of fine wines in Italy—still family owned. James Mariani and his cousin Cristina Mariani-May are following in the footsteps of their fathers and their grandfather.

BELOW LEFT: James Mariani of Banfi Vintners.

BELOW RIGHT: Tom Cassidy, member of Chaîne des Rôtisseurs.





Name Your Game

Live Your Lifestyle

It's your turn now.

From exceptional golf and tennis at exceptional rates,
to first class entertainment, and bountiful hunting and fishing,

Tunica National Community is your new address
to live your life to it's fullest.

Tunica National Community. A lifestyle you'll love!



TUNICA NATIONAL
A MASTER PLANNED COMMUNITY

662-363-9510 www.TunicaNationalCommunity.com



Offering 10 issues a year

Two years, \$30 | One year, \$19.95

Two or more gift subscriptions | only \$15 each!

Order online at midsouthmagazine.com or by phone • 901.271.6700

MIDSOUTH

The first course was a delicate sautéed Mero Bass with Roasted Eggplant in a Lemon Sauce. Banfi's Serena Sauvignon Blanc 2006 was an ideal match. Mariani explained that Banfi's number-one selling wine in Italy is made from Sauvignon Blanc grapes. Whereas most American's consider Pinot Grigio the most popular Italian white, Italians actually prefer the richness found in an oak-aged Sauvignon Blanc such as the Serena.

Made with 100-percent select Sangiovese clones, Castello Banfi Rosso Di Montalcino 2006 was a nice accompaniment to Roth's Roast Duck Breast with Kalamata Olive Risotto. Considered the famed Brunello di Montalcino's younger sibling, Rosso di Montalcino is aged less than its elder counterpart—12 months in wood (half in French oak barrique and half in Slavonian oak casks) followed by at least six months in the bottle before release. It is deep ruby-red in color with a dry, round, velvety taste and generous body—characteristics similar to those desired in a great Brunello. "It's a wine that says 'Hello. I am here,' with a pleasant handshake," jokes Mariani.

A SummuS 1998 was paired with a rich dish of Braised Kobe Beef Short Ribs over Truffled Cannellini Bean Puree. "This is our highest expression of all our experimentation of blends," boasts Mariani. "This silky sensuous wine brings you right to the heart of Tuscany." Since it is a blend of Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah grapes, the wine doesn't fit in the traditional designations of Italian wines; hence, the invented name SummuS, which translates from Latin as "the highest."

For the cheese and the dessert courses respectively, a Poggio alle Mura Brunello di Montalcino 1998 and a Rosa Regale 2007 were served. The deep ruby Poggio offered aromas of violets and sweet red fruits lending itself a perfect match for rich cheeses like Parmigiano Reggiano. Made from 100-percent Brocato grapes, the Rosa Regale is a beautifully structured champagne-style red that truly marries well with chocolate.

In summary, Mariani concludes that an event like the Chaîne dinner in Memphis is a good indicator of trends in the wine industry. "People are looking for the more natural elements in wine that emanate from the grape and from the particular area it is grown. The subtle differences that make a wine exciting and fun." When picking out your next bottle of wine, consider one from the Banfi portfolio for a taste of the creative and artisan wines that have made Italy one of the top wine producers of the world. ●