Food and Wine: Oregon pinot noir catches on with Blue Heron scallops

by Ron James

THE CHEF

It was a cold November evening in 2005 and the Blue Heron Restaurant's grand opening was going smoothly. After all, chef Deborah Snow and manager Barbara White had operated the award-winning restaurant for six years at a nearby location. This redesigned 120-seat restaurant in the historic Old Town Hall in Sunderland, Mass., was the partners' dream come true.

But the dream turned to a nightmare when White was urgently called to the kitchen.

"We'd run out of propane," Snow said. "We paid our gas bill, but the company had just screwed up. Now we had 180 diners in various stages of dining. We served the last of anything we had and then went around to each table offering free wine and cocktails. We still have customers who come in and say 'I was here at your grand opening when you ran out of gas!'"

DEBORAH SNOW - Deborah Snow is the chef of the Blue Heron Restaurant in the historic Old Town Hall in Sunderland, Mass. CNS Photo. PAN-SEARED SEA SCALLOPS - Chef Deborah Snow recommends large scallops be used in preparing Pan-Seared Sea Scallops with Lentils, Bacon and Cider Reduction. CNS Photo.The Blue Heron survived that initial disaster - and got a deep discount on its propane for the rest of the year. Now, this small-town restaurant has garnered attention in national food publications that generally focus on big-city dining. It received the Award of Excellence from Wine Spectator and was featured in Bon Appetite along with today's featured recipe, Pan-Seared Sea Scallops with Lentils, Bacon and Cider Reduction.

THE DISH

In Bon Appetit, the magazine staff asked what was the secret to the scallop dish that wowed them. Snow simply said, "Balance."

"I am always looking for balance. Balance is about making the many components work harmoniously together. It's also very much about our taste buds playing off one another - it's that gestalt thing - the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

Snow suggests that you get large (about 10 per pound) scallops for this dish. Make sure the scallops have a nice white opalescence and a fresh ocean smell. If they smell fishy or have a hint of ammonia, don't buy them.

"Don't substitute other lentils in this dish," emphasizes the chef. "Use only French lentils (lentilles du Puy) or the dish will not be the same." French lentils are more flavorful and a bit smaller and lighter than most common lentils. They also take a bit longer to cook. Although they are called French lentils they actually originated in southeast Asia. You can find them in health food stores and online.

THE WINE

Although a light-bodied pinot noir would work with this dish, play it safe with a delicious 2004 Lumos Pinot Gris ($14). This Oregon white will really showcase the flavors of the scallop dish, mascarpone cream and cider reduction.

The Lumos winery is located in McMinnville, Ore., and owned by Dai Crisp and his wife, PK McCoy. Before starting his own winery, Crisp was well known for managing some of the top wineries in Oregon. The wine has crisp acidity balanced by honey and big, ripe fruit flavors.

PAN-SEARED SEA SCALLOPS WITH LENTILS, BACON AND CIDER REDUCTION

Mascarpone cream:

1/2 cup dry white wine

2 tablespoons chopped shallots

1/4 cup whipping cream

1/4 cup mascarpone cheese

1 teaspoon finely grated lemon peel

1/2 teaspoon chopped fresh chives

Cider reduction:

2 cups apple cider

1 cup apple cider vinegar

1/4 cup chopped shallots

Lentils:

6 whole cloves

1 medium onion, peeled

6 cups water

1 1/2 cups French green lentils (lentilles du Puy; about 12 ounces)

2 bay leaves

6 slices thick-cut applewood-smoked bacon, cut crosswise 1/4-inch thick

1/4 cup chopped shallots

1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme

Scallops:

6 tablespoons butter (divided use)

18 sea scallops, patted dry

Salt and pepper, to taste

2 tablespoons olive oil

Yields 6 servings.

To prepare mascarpone cream: Place wine and shallots in heavy small saucepan. Boil until almost dry, about 6 minutes. Add cream. Boil until reduced by 1/2, about 2 minutes. Stir in mascarpone, lemon peel and chives. (Can be made 1 day ahead. Transfer to small bowl; cover and chill. Rewarm before serving.)

To prepare cider reduction: Place cider, vinegar and shallots in heavy medium saucepan. Boil until reduced by 3/4 cup, about 15 minutes. Strain; discard solids in strainer. Return cider mixture to pan. (Can be made 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate.)

To prepare lentils: Press thin end of cloves into peeled onion. Place onion in heavy large saucepan. Add water, lentils and bay leaves. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until lentils are tender,

stirring occasionally, about 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, cook bacon in heavy large skillet over medium heat until crisp. Using slotted spoon, transfer bacon to paper towels. Pour all but 3 tablespoons fat from skillet. Add shallots to skillet and saute over medium heat until golden, about 2 minutes.

Drain lentils, discarding onion and bay leaves. Add reserved bacon, lentils and thyme to shallots. (Lentils can be made 2 hours ahead. Let stand at room temperature. Rewarm over medium heat, stirring often.)

To prepare scallops: Bring cider reduction to simmer. Whisk in 5 tablespoons butter, 1 tablespoon at a time. Keep warm.

Season scallops to taste with salt and pepper. Melt 1 tablespoon butter with oil in heavy large skillet over medium-high heat. Add scallops and cook until brown, about 2 minutes per side.

Divide lentils among 6 plates. Arranged 3 scallops atop lentils on each plate. Drizzle cider reduction over scallops and around lentils. Drizzle warm mascarpone cream over.

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