

by Ron James

THE WINE ENTHUSIAST

Reading "Red, White & Drunk All Over: A Wine-Soaked Journey from Grape to Glass" (Bloomsbury, \$23.95), I couldn't help but compare its author, award-winning wine journalist Natalie MacLean, to George Plimpton.

Plimpton was famous for participating in professional sporting events and then writing about the experience. His most famous sports romp was with the Detroit Lions as a backup quarterback during spring training. From that experience came a best-selling book and the movie "Paper Lion."

Instead of enduring bone-crushing sports, MacLean rolled up her sleeves and sipped, spit and slogged her way through the wine world. In a series of adventures, MacLean revealed she fears no wine snobbery whether she is undercover as a sommelier at a five-star French restaurant or on the staff of high-end wine retailers in New York and California.

One adventure had MacLean working at Bonny Doon Vineyards winery in Santa Cruz, Calif. "He gives me a pair of knee-high black rubber boot and leads me over to a pile of those python hoses," she writes. "He puts a heavy nozzle in my hands and walks away. He's 10 feet off before I realize that I'm supposed to follow him while hauling this hundred-pound sucker."

NATALIE MACLEAN - Wine journalist Natalie MacLean has been honored with many awards, including four James Beard Foundation Journalism Awards. CNS Photo courtesy of Marc Fowler.

LAMB STEW - Navarin simply means a lamb and vegetable stew. The secret to making this delicious is getting the very best vegetables you can, says chef Tracey Black of Epicuria Fine Foods and Catering in Ottawa. CNS Photo.

After a brutal day in the winery, MacLean is exhausted. "I'm surprised that someone hasn't yet published a book called 'The Total Winery Workout: Develop Harvest Abs, Grape Crushing Thighs, and Buns of Stainless Steel.' At last, I have become one with my subject. I feel like a human grape: sticky, purple and completely crushed."

MacLean's book is unpretentious, honest and humorous. What other wine writer would admit that one of wine's fundamental charms is its alcohol. "I have to confess, much as I'm drawn to its nuances, I wouldn't be writing about wine if it weren't for the buzz," she writes in the book's introduction. "I love the way a glass of wine make me feel - invigorated and animated, released from my own shyness."

MacLean, an accredited sommelier and wine judge, is no paper tiger when it comes to knowing wine. Her writing has been honored with many awards including four James Beard Foundation Journalism Awards.

THE DISH

MacLean turned to her Canadian chef friend Tracey Black for a traditional dish, Spring Navarin of Lamb. Black is the executive chef of Epicuria Fine Foods and Catering in Ottawa. Navarin simply means a lamb and vegetable stew. The secret to this dish is the fresh vegetables - get the very best you can.

Boneless leg of lamb is available from your butcher or at most big box stores like Costco. Most spring lamb is excellent this time of year. American lamb has a reputation for a milder, less gamey flavor than its Australian and New Zealand cousins.

THE WINE

Lamb is one of the very best meats to match with wine. Almost any wine will go with lamb including red, white and rose, though the traditional choice is a red. "I'd match this to a cabernet either from California or Bordeaux," suggests MacLean. "It's a classic pairing since the juiciness of the meat goes so well with the tannins and flavors in the wine."

We've taken MacLean's advice and selected a fruit forward 2003 Frank Family Vineyard's Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$45) for a great match with the savory lamb stew. It has complex layers of cherry, chocolate and blackberry. It is well balanced with refined tannins and perfect acidity.

MacLean has an elaborate Web site featuring wine and food pairing information and a free, easy-to-use matching tool: [http:// www.nataliemaclean.com/matcher](http://www.nataliemaclean.com/matcher).

SPRING NAVARIN OF LAMB

2 pounds boneless lamb leg or shoulder

Salt and pepper, to taste

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 large onion, diced

2 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary

1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme

1 cup red wine

1 cup canned tomatoes with juice, seeded and crushed

3 cups beef or lamb stock

2 carrots peeled and roll cut

12 new baby potatoes

12 pearl onions, skinned

1/2 pound fresh green beans

1/2 pound sliced mushrooms (button and shiitake)

1 leek, cut into 1/2 inch dice

1/2 bunch chervil, for garnish

Yields 4 servings.

Cut lamb into 1 inch cubes and pat dry. Season lamb with salt and pepper. Heat saute pan to medium-high temperature; add vegetable oil and brown lamb in small batches. Set lamb aside in braising pot. Saute onions in browning pans, adding garlic when onions have softened. Add rosemary and thyme when onions have browned. Saute for 2 to 3 minutes and then add mixture to lamb.

Deglaze browning pans with red wine and reduce by 1/2. Add tomato pulp to pot. Add enough stock to bring liquid level to just below covering meat. Bring to a boil and simmer for 1 1/2 to 2 hours or until fork tender. Lamb can also be placed in 350 F oven for the same amount of time.

While lamb is braising, prepare vegetables. Separately, cook carrots, potatoes, onions and green beans in salted water until just done - keeping them slightly crispy. Cool them immediately in ice water. Saute mushrooms and leeks.

When lamb is ready, remove from pot and skim off excess fat. Reduce to thicken or thicken with 1 tablespoon of cornstarch slurry.

Add lamb and vegetables to pot and simmer for 5 to 10 minutes until heated through.

- Recipe from Tracey Black

Ron James welcomes comments and suggestions. E-mail him at ronjames@perfectpairings.us. Listen to his "Gourmet Club" radio show and see archives of previous columns at www.perfectpairings.us.

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Food and Wine: Frank Family cabernet goes well with lamb stew by Ron James