

MARDI GRAS LIKE A VENETIAN: CAN NAPA VALLEY GET ITS CARNIVAL ON?

BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN



I survived five years as a single

girl on corporate assignment in a small Gulf coast town. My secret? Partying incognito at every New Orleans Mardi Gras. A purple mask and some blurry-good memories remain from that era.

Recently, I ventured into Venice, where storefronts bulged with Carnival masks. How did this City-on-the-Lagoon become Carnival obsessed? I met over lunch with Pierluigi Bolla, the owner of Valdo Prosecco in Valdobbiadene, and discovered that DOCG Prosecco was way better than the stuff from the broader appellation and that Bolla had been Minister of Tourism for Venice in the late '90s. Our conversation flowed into the reality of Venice Mardi Gras.

"Carnival in Venice today is an international, two week party. Thousands of people—Venetians, Italians, foreigners—all meet in San Marco Square to dance, party and fan out to events. Balls go on from morning to night, and many wear traditional Venetian masks," said Bolla.

A return to Venice for Mardi Gras? Unlikely. But I remembered the blow-out Napa Gras party that vintner Jean-Charles Boisset threw at Raymond Vineyards in February. Where else could one wear beads and a mask? I couldn't name any other valley Mardi Gras aficionados. Could Napans learn a few tips from the Venetians?

The Venetians are credited with setting the standard for Carnival celebrations. During the Middle Ages, when Venice dominated the seas, its citizens mastered the art of the masquerade party. Many parties and balls are open to the public, but some, he added, such as the well-known Ballo del Doge, "Ball of the Duke," are private.

I contacted Antonia Sautter, Venice costume designer, mask creator and producer of Ballo del Doge. "For their fantasy evenings, my clients find glamour and inspiration from history, fairy tales, literature or cinema," said the designer.

Sautter sets the stage for Mardi Gras with sensory alchemy. A costumed "Leo Doge," a lion "duke" wearing the Winged Lion symbols of Venice's glory days, welcomed guests.

Belly dancers and Moorish “guards” evoke Venice’s historic role as trading nexus between East and West. Classic and contemporary tableaux vivants and music wafts through the palace rooms.

With Napa Valley’s fascination for vintage wine and fashion, Sautter suggests dressing up at Mardi Gras with Grandmother’s dresses or modestly priced recycled fashion. What’s a party without food and drink? Sautter serves bubbles to celebrate the season. Bolla notes that Prosecco is locally produced and a traditional beverage at Carnival, with the bonus of lower alcohol content during long hours of partying.

At Da Ivo, my favorite spot in the San Marco district, the dining room hosts a special entry door for those arriving by gondola. During Carnival, guests are often greeted with a glass of Valdo Prosecco, followed by a feast of traditional fegato alla Venezia e frittole e galani, finely sliced liver with sautéed onions with small, sweet Carnival fritters for dessert.

Luckily Boisset of Boisset Family Estates turned to New Orleans for Napa Gras culinary at Raymond Vineyards. My favorite match ups were beignets with JCB sparkling wine in the Red Room and oysters with Raymond whites in the Barrel Room.

I recently asked Boisset why he hosted Napa Gras. “Mardi Gras occurred during Premier Napa, a serious wine event with people tasting and buying barrels of wine. The wine world needs some excitement—a place to travel and dream, a place to dress up and show your secret personality behind a mask.” As guests arrived at Raymond they were handed colorful masks. Boisset likes the equalizing effect of Mardi Gras balls. “We may not know a person’s identity, perhaps a neighbor, restaurateur or winemaker. People seem more approachable in masks.”

Winter in Napa Valley is sometimes called “Cabernet Season” when folks gather for hearty meals that call for Napa reds. Hotel Mardi Gras packages are rare. Meadowood Napa Valley points to their busy February schedule: Valentine’s Day, Presidents Day, Premiere Napa, and an annual Wine Writers Symposium.

But I’ve discovered that Mardi Gras thrives at a few valley spots. BarbersQ in Napa will double their authentic take on étouffée and jambalaya. Both GM Kelly Sherman and new Executive Chef Randy Lewis hail from New Orleans. Hurley’s Restaurant and Bar in Yountville presents a Mardi Gras bash with Cajun music, masks and beads. Bob Hurley brings in a special New Orleanian chef who dishes up seafood gumbo and more.

A new Mardi Gras venue is Fish Story on the Napa River. Along with another fave, fried oyster po-boys (think seafood sub sandwich), I’m drooling for the prix fixe dinner menus: oysters Rockefeller, seafood gumbo and beignets or the more gourmet feast with crawdad (crawfish) boil appetizer and lobster Thermidor options.

After crawdads by the water, I’ll head for Raymond Vineyards. Boisset has promised new mysteries and adventures for Napa Gras 2013. Tickets will be available at <http://raymondvineyards.com/> in mid-January.

“I’ve been to Venice Mardi Gras and we won’t match that. But we want to know the person behind the mask,” said Boisset. “The discovery is like a wine label. We describe the wine with art and words. But you don’t know the wine until you pull the cork.”