

# A Match Made by Eleven

WENTE FAMILY ESTATES  
TRAVELS TO LOS ANGELES FOR  
A SOMMELIER LUNCHEON

by Emily Coleman / photos by Jeremy Ball

Anthony Dias Blue, the Editor-in-Chief of THE TASTING PANEL, puts it best: “The Wente family is royalty in the California wine industry.” So when Karl Wente ventured to Los Angeles in early April, the top tastemakers in the city’s wine scene were eager to attend an exclusive lunch that paired Wente Family Estates wines with the farm fresh cuisine that the City of Angels does so well. Eleven sommeliers joined the Fifth Generation Winemaker and THE TASTING PANEL at Girasol Restaurant in Studio City, which focuses on approachable dishes featuring ingredients that Executive Chef CJ Jacobson forages or selects from farmer’s markets himself.

With nine wines chosen by Karl to show off the winery’s classic offerings, our somms were ready to sip and savor. While introducing the wines, Karl offered a brief background on the winery and his historic family—mentioning that farming the same grapes every year has allowed the Wentes to learn the idiosyncrasies of the grapes and create the best wines possible. He accredited his family’s long and continued success to a simple mantra: “If you take care of the soil, the land and the people, they will take care of you.”

As the lunch courses were introduced, we asked our guests to jot down tasting notes and pair each dish with one of the nine wines served. To push their palates even further, they were also tasked to select a dish from their own establishment to complement each wine.

With endless combinations at their disposal, these somms narrow down their favorite pairings and provide us with an inside look at how they would serve Wente Family Estates wines with everything on the menu.



Anthony Dias Blue welcomes the somms to the Wente pairing luncheon.





Jessie Birschbach, Sommelier at Maestro's noted, "The steely, acidic nature of Eric's Chardonnay balances the acid of the roasted butternut squash salad."



## Meet the Chef: CJ Jacobson

After multiple *Top Chef* appearances and a stint at Denmark's Noma, CJ Jacobson decided to bring his expertise to the Valley. As a California native, he wants his cuisine to be based on what is wild and natural to the area, so he spends an average of five to six hours a week in the canyons of the surrounding Los Angeles area scavenging for wild herbs and plants. Concentrating on what he finds on his excursions and at farmer's markets, Jacobson strives to create dishes using the seasons as his narrative. He stresses that these ingredients are not garnishes—but rather—what the dish is built around.



**Executive Chef CJ Jacobson with Wente Family Estates' Fifth Generation Winemaker Karl Wente.**

*Here is the menu from our Wente Family Estates Sommelier Lunch:*

- ▶ Roasted butternut squash salad with burrata, green strawberries and bacon, topped with a citrus date vinaigrette
- ▶ Potato, garlic and green onion soup garnished with Brussels sprouts and rhubarb
- ▶ Chicken panzanella served with fried kale with lemon and frisée
- ▶ New York Prime strip with roasted grapes and California fennel palm in a sauce of reduced grapes
- ▶ Seasonal berry and rhubarb crumble with lemon thyme and crème fraîche



## JERRY GARBUS,

Wine Director, MB Post and Fishing with Dynamite, Manhattan Beach



**Jerry Garbus.**

Having begun his career in the restaurant industry as a busboy, Jerry Garbus has held many titles throughout the years. This wide range of experiences might clarify the unique ideology he has as a Wine Director: “Food comes first, and the wine should be there to lift the dish.” That being said, not getting in the way of the chef doesn’t limit Jerry to bland wines. When



**The chicken panzanella and Wente Vineyards Eric’s Chardonnay made a delightful duo that Garbus especially appreciated.**

creating the list for both of these beach-town hotspots, he looks for soulful and handcrafted labels from all over the world, with over 70% of his selections imported from unique and up-and-coming growing regions.

Garbus also doesn’t try to push specific pairings, explaining that, “As customers become more familiar with wine, they will become more comfortable matching wines however they want to.”

### **Jerry’s take on the Wente Vineyards 2012 Small Lot Eric’s Chardonnay:**

The bright, pure aromatics makes my mouth water. Classic orchard fruits shine on top, and a waft of banana comes to life. The beautifully cooked chicken panzanella deserves a squeeze of lemon to add acidity—the wine does just that. The bright flavors in the wine would wonderfully match the bright sweetness in our chilled Dungeness crab at Fishing with Dynamite.



## KAREN MONEYSMAKER

Sommelier, Spago, Beverly Hills



**Karen Moneymaker.**

Spago Beverly Hills has introduced an entire tasting menu highlighting California cuisine, which can include a curated wine pairing. While Karen Moneymaker acknowledges that chemistry plays into matching these dishes to wines and there are certain rules to follow, she believes that it ultimately comes down to personal preference and drinking what you want. When in doubt, Moneymaker swears,



**The New York prime strip pairs impeccably with Murrieta’s Well The Spur as Moneymaker points out.**

“Champagne goes with everything!”

After working several harvests, Moneymaker might consider herself to be a “Napa Girl,” she’s got plenty of reverence for the Livermore growing region and the wines produced there: “Wente is a dark horse. When you talk about California wine, you say Napa—but then you always do have to mention Wente and their incredible legacy.”

### **Karen’s take on the Murrieta’s Well 2011 The Spur:**

Notes of pencil shavings are layered with chewy red fruit including cranberry and French strawberries. It is a super plush and velvety wine. The tannins from the Cabernet in the red blend stand up to the richness of the steak from lunch and would accentuate the Sonoma spring lamb rack with spring vegetables and cumin-carrot purée from Spago.



## VINCE JUNG

Owner, Formosa Café, West Hollywood



**Vince Jung.**

While it may be best known for its historic cocktail program, at Formosa Café, Vince aims to better educate his customers about wine, which is why he created a by-the-glass program that changes every month. By offering a low-commitment option to trying new wines, his hope is to expand palates and allow his guests to be able to distinguish between what he calls, “The two kinds of wine:

the ones you like and the ones you don’t.” While he may offer some basic guidelines to get them started, Jung wants customers to figure out their preferences on their own.

Already serving Wente wines at Formosa Café, Jung was thrilled to get to meet with the winemaker in person, and hopes to bring that encounter to his guests, who he says are particularly fond of the winery’s red offerings.

### **Vince’s take on the Wente Vineyards 2010 Reliz Creek Pinot Noir:**

This is a very smooth and savory Pinot that has a lot of earthy tones. To bring out the fruit in the wine, I would like to enjoy this wine with the chicken and fried kale that Chef Jacobson prepared. The pork belly from my restaurant would also balance these notes perfectly.



## KEVIN BULLA

Beverage Director, Palihouse, West Hollywood



**Kevin Bulla.**

The West Hollywood location of Palihouse is the kind of place where a glass of wine in the bar is served with a side of celeb sightings, so it’s no surprise the wine program here leans toward the ultra-hip, the niche and the boutique. “We work really hard to find things that are unique and different,” says Bulla.

But out-of-the-ordinary doesn’t always mean better to Bulla. “There’s definitely a place on our list and

in my heart for classic wines,” he says. “Wines like the ones the Wente family produce are a part of the California winemaking history, and I think events like these are such a great opportunity for buyers to get to know the wines better. I’m excited!”

### **Kevin’s take on the Wente Vineyards 2012 Louis Mel Sauvignon Blanc:**

Citrus notes are very apparent upon first sip. It is well-balanced and mellow but is also crisp. Since it has good acidity and bright flavors, it would couple impeccably with the salad as well as the grilled peach, burrata, prosciutto small plate from my restaurant.



## JESSIE BIRSCHBACH

Sommelier, Mastro’s Steakhouse, Beverly Hills



**Jessie Birschbach.**

Known for its sophisticated atmosphere and high quality dining experience, Mastro’s Steakhouse serves some of the best steak in the country. Naturally, such premium products deserve to be paired with premium wines. Birschbach, along with a talented team of sommeliers, work to guide guests through their California-dominant wine list in a way that educates without intimidating.

A proud native Californian who loves to support the local wine industry, Birschbach crafts pairings with great thought, looking to the main ingredient, how it is prepared and the most significant note of the dish to make her decision. She explains, “I try to be as open as possible when matching a wine to a dish and not make it overly complicated.”

### **Jessie’s take on the Wente Vineyards 2011 Sandstone Merlot:**

Red berries and dark chocolate are very prominent in this wine. The sweet berries and the char of the New York strip from lunch would complement the wine very nicely. At Mastro’s, I would pair the wine’s dark chocolate notes to our creamy veal.



## DARREN WEISS AND NADIA PAVLEVSKA

Owner and Executive Chef, and Sommelier;  
Darren's Restaurant, Manhattan Beach



**Darren Weiss.**



**Nadia Pavlevska.**

"The focus should be on people having a good time and coming together," said Darren Weiss when he explains the friendly feel at his eponymous restaurant. In pursuit of this goal, Weiss wants his patrons to drink flavorful wine that blends nicely with the food he creates, so he turned to Nadia Pavlevska, originally from Bulgaria, to bring more of an Old World influence to the wine program.

Since her start, Pavlevska has expanded the restaurant's wine list from two pages to six. When it comes to pairings, Nadia likes to take a step back when pairing to decide what defines the dish. "The best way is to taste," Nadia explains, "and it always involves some trial-and-error to find that perfect match."

### **Darren's take on the Murrieta's Well 2011 The Spur:**

A very stylish wine! I taste hints of smoked chocolate, which would accompany the earthy tones of the New York steak beautifully. The rib-eye from Darren's is a very heavy dish that I would want to pair with the spicy and lush notes of this robust wine.

### **Nadia's take on Wente**

**Vineyards Brut:** The brut is very crisp and lively. Although I do not typically pair non-dessert wine with dessert, I think this sparkling goes nicely with the crumble because the wine is quite refreshing and does a fantastic job of balancing the sugar and tangy flavors of the crumble.



## SHAWN KERWIN

Owner, On the Thirty, Sherman Oaks



**Shawn Kerwin.**

Shawn Kerwin opened On the Thirty because he simply loves to eat and drink. This wine virtuoso self-describes his views on pairing as unorthodox. Without even bringing food into the equation, he states, "If a wine is great, it can go with anything." Based on this philosophy, On the Thirty carries only fabulous wines meticulously curated from exclusively California and from mainly boutique vineyards. The rationale behind his approach is two-fold: He enjoys introducing his customers to these niche experiences, and he believes strongly in putting money back into the local economy.

Since Kerwin's program consists of solely California wines, he was excited to learn more about Wente's offerings. Not that he isn't already a fan—his passion for artisanship and the unique flavors has led him to especially gravitate towards Wente Family Estates winery exclusive and Small Lot labels, which he'd recently explored on a visit to the Livermore winery.

### **Shawn's take on the Murrieta's Well 2012 The Whip:**

Easy to drink, this fresh wine has a great fruit balance that reminds me of summer. These aromatic notes would be a wonderful complement to the soup from this lunch and the pesto spinach salad from On the Thirty.



**The most popular pairing dish of the afternoon, the potato, garlic and green onion soup work nicely with The Whip.**

## JORDAN OGRON

Director of Food & Beverage,  
The Standard, Hollywood



**Jordan Ogron.**

The son of an avid wine collector, Jordan Ogron knew the difference between a varietal and a variety from a very early age. While his knowledge of wine is far beyond his years, he says his true strength lies in his palate. Whatever his secret might be, it has enabled him to manage a handful of upscale restaurants and become the Director of Food & Beverage

at The Standard, Hollywood in Los Angeles—all before he even turned 27. One of his first tasks at The Standard, Hollywood will be to open their new restaurant later this year.

Jordan believes that there are only two types of sommeliers: “the one who buys wine to go with food and the one who buys wine to drink on its own.” He identifies himself as the latter and hopes that people will be returning to The Standard, Hollywood for that rare glass of wine that they can’t get off their mind.

**Jordan’s take on The Nth Degree 2011 Cabernet Sauvignon:** With a great tannin structure, it is very well-balanced with notes of blackberry, raspberry and cigar box on the back palate. I loved this wine with the reduction of the prime rib in today’s luncheon and would pair it with the porcini-crust rib eye from The Standard.



## ADAM SPICER

General Manager, Café del Rey,  
Marina del Rey



**Adam Spicer.**

When your restaurant does over \$20,000 in wine sales per week, it’s a safe bet to say you’ve got a wine for every price point and palate. “We try to have something for everyone,” explains Spicer, who also cites customer service as one of the factors that made Café del Rey’s wine program a James Beard Award winner. “We serve all of our wines tableside,” he says. “From by-the-glass, to bottle service, we feel that it is important for the guest to have the opportunity to ask questions and learn about what they’re drinking.”

While we were set to put Spicer through his pairing paces, he wasn’t worried too much. “Honestly,” he said, “I think just about any wine can be served with just about any food. I don’t like to follow the rules too much, and I think guests shouldn’t have to either!”

### **Adam’s Take on the Wente Vineyards 2012 Riva Ranch**

**Chardonnay:** This golden Chardonnay is very fruit-forward and has a creamy texture on the palate. The buttery base of the soup would fit seamlessly with the richness of the wine. The steelhead from Café del Rey and this Chardonnay would be a delicious match.



## JASON MOSLEY

General Manager, Girasol Restaurant, Studio City



**Jason Mosley.**

As our host for the day, Mosley may have had his pairings in mind before we put him to the test: “I know Chef’s food, and I know these wines, and I think they’re going to be a great match,” he told us before things got underway. Having only been at Girasol for three weeks as of press time, Mosley was excited to continue to develop the wine program, which already serves and sells “a lot” of Wente wines.

“It’s exciting to come in here and make it my own,” says Mosley, who caught the wine bug big time working front of house in Napa. “The menu here has so many interesting, local things going on, and I really want to carry that over to the wine program. I’m open to just about anything!”

### **Jason’s Take on the Wente Vineyards 2012 Louis Mel**

**Sauvignon Blanc:** Earth tones abound in this wine. It would pair well with the soup since both are not huge palate busters, but more elegant versions of themselves. I could see this nuanced wine balancing out a number of the rustic, yet elegant dishes of Chef Jacobson. ■■

