

Well the T.J. Martell Foundation Best Cellars Dinner just gets better and better. In its 4th year, the food, wine and celebrities were over the top.

The guest chef this year was Mario Batali of New York City fame. He brought five sous chefs and himself to cook for 150 people. Each patron paid \$800 to the T.J. Martell Foundation (a foundation for leukemia, cancer and AIDS research) to enjoy five courses of Mario's best. In the kitchen of the Loews Vanderbilt Hotel were some of the best chefs in Nashville helping chop, prep and plate. Even attorney Mark Manner was seen plating Mario's best.

The evening started with a champagne reception, passed hors d'oeuvres, and lots of country music stars. Faith hugged Martina, Martina hugged Deana, and Joe Galante got hugged the most. Each table of 10 had at least one star and one wine geek (I was the wine geek).

As you entered the dining room Holly Whaley had created the porch of an Italian villa, complete with opera singer and band. We were all seated; Bill Hearn made some remarks and the show started. My waiter was Walter and he did a fabulous job of keeping the wine and food straight. Deana Carter was at my table and she doesn't eat meat. So Mario cooked for her individually – what a treat! Without a plan, he sent out the best fare of the evening to Deana.

Most wine hosts chose Italian wine, a few chose French. Without a doubt the greatest Italian wines were there.

I served a Gaja Chardonnay from 1997 as the opening wine – rich, pineapple, melon and pear. Built to last 20 years, it was just hitting its prime. It went great with the antipasto, which was a combination of coppa and pecorino (sheep's milk cheese from Italy). This was cold cuts for us Tennesseans.

The next course was ravioli stuffed with salt Cod. I chose a 1985 Barbaresco from Gaja. One of the top 10 Barbaresco's of all time. It was dried cherries, hints of chocolate and leather with a finish a mile long.

Next Mario served pasta and fennel stuffed sausages. Not what you get at the Waffle House, but very tasty and served hot for 150 people – wow! This course got my favorite Italian wine of all time – 1995 Masseto. A 100% Merlot it rocked our world. Many call this the Petrus of Italy and it showed all its class and breeding with the pasta. If anyone ever offers you a Masseto politely answer YES!

The last food course was shortribs. Simple, but fantastic. The wine choice was Barolo. I served two old style Barolo's from 1990 (the best year for Barolo's ever until 1998). The first was Conterno's and the second Mascarello's. Conterno's 1990 is considered by many to be the best Barolo ever made. Huge fruit, lots of tannin, and an almost chewy consistency. A classic example of Barolo.

The star of the Food Network finished the evening with a coffee cup full of chocolate pudding and whipped cream. The wine was a 1991 Vin Santo. A thick, rich syrup that cut the chocolate and was just a tad sweeter than the pudding (important when serving dessert wines).

After dinner a few friends (50) gathered at my house for more wine and food. The last wine of the night was a 1961 Latour (I saved some and had it Tuesday night). This is a very special Bordeaux that one should only have alone in a hallowed setting, but what are friends for?

At 3:30 am on Tuesday, Tony Brown was playing the piano, some of country music's best were singing and Mario was making steak, eggs, and potatoes in the kitchen. At 4:00 am it was over and Mario and his crew had experienced some real Southern hospitality.

When you talk about making memories, this evening qualified.