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Holiday Glow



THINGS WE LIKE

fireside dining

There are five roaring fireplaces going at the **Milton Inn**, including a wood-burning one in the hearth room. A big fireplace once used for cooking is now a diner's haven and the perfect place to dig into a winter special—Surf 'n Turf—a filet mignon with bearnaise sauce and a lobster tail with drawn butter and lemon, for \$35. It comes with a choice of two sides, but chef Brian Boston's preferences are the smoked corn and cheddar grits, and sautéed spinach. The best drink to go with it? "Champagne," says Boston. With such a modest price for the meal, there's a little left over to splurge on Boston's favorite, Veuve Clicquot Yellow Label, which is offered by the bottle and half-bottle. For dessert, a chocolate bread pudding or vanilla bean cheese-cake makes for a hard decision, so you might just want to order a seasonal cheese plate from local store The Great Cheese, full of Morbier, a little Saint André, some Beaufort and a Guinness Cheddar. *The Milton Inn, 14833 York Road, Sparks, 410-771-4366, www.miltoninn.com* —Jessica Krznaric



INFORMATION, PLEASE

winter warm-up

Character actor George Miller said it best, "The trouble with eating Italian food is that five or six days later you're hungry again." Italian food is some of the tastiest in the world, and those heavy carbs make any pasta dish a perfect winter food. Chef Nino Germano at **La Scala Ristorante** (along with brother Nick), serves up some of the best. But regardless of how good they cook, their Mom won't share her cannoli recipe with them. "It's her secret. And it's like nothing you've ever had before," says Nino. "The filling is not ricotta, it's a cream my Mom makes. Sometimes you'll see one of our ads in town that simply reads, 'Mama's back.' That's because people know that when Mom returns from Sicily, they can start eating her famous cannoli again." A tasty companion to go with such a dessert is the La Scala cappuccino, yet another secret recipe that, says Nino, "is a little nutty, a little coffee, a little frothy. It's great when it's a little chilly out." But why go out? Have your cannoli and cappuccino overlooking the indoor bocce court. When asked if a newbie could play, Nino laughs. "Everyone here knows how to play bocce. That's one secret we love to share." *La Scala Ristorante, 1012 Eastern Ave., 410-783-9209, lascaladining.com*

SIPPING IN STYLE

stateside sparklers

While Champagne, France, might be the birthplace of sparkling wine, it by no means has a monopoly on it. If you're looking for some fine bubbly to serve at your holiday gatherings, you needn't search that far from home.

An important point to remember: Only wines that originate from Champagne, France, can officially use the term "Champagne." All other wines with bubbles are simply called "sparkling wines."

The three grapes that are used to make Champagne are Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. Most American sparklers concentrate on making still wines from the first two, which are blended to take advantage of each grape's varietal character. Then a secondary fermentation is induced by the addition of sugar and yeast to create the bubbles that make these wines so special.

In the 18th century, pioneers of Champagne production like Dom Pérignon and Madame Clicquot created a process for crafting sparkling wine that is still used today. You can identify New World sparklers that use this Champagne method by looking for the term *méthode champenoise* or *méthode traditionnelle* on the bottle. One of the hallmarks of the Champagne method is that the bubbles are created in each bottle, not in a tank, which results in finer bubbles and more complexity.

If you are looking to taste some "Made in the USA" sparklers that use the traditional Champagne method, here are two to try:

> **Schramsberg Vineyards Blanc de Blancs 2006** (retails around \$40)

Schramsberg Vineyards has made quality sparkling wines in Napa Valley since 1965. They are credited with being the first American winery to make a Chardonnay-based sparkling wine and also the first American sparkler to be served at the White House. Sparklers that bear the term *Blanc de Blancs* (translated "white from whites") are made entirely from the Chardonnay grape. The Schramsberg Blanc de Blancs has flavors of green apple, pineapple and pear with a finish of crisp acidity. Elegant and dry, it is a perfect pairing for all things seafood, triple-cream cheeses and its classic partner—oysters.

> **Gruet Winery Blanc de Noirs NV** (retails under \$20)

This winery was started by the Gruet family from Champagne, France. They toured the world looking for a place where they could make wines that rivaled those of Champagne and found the perfect spot near Albuquerque, N.M. Since 1983, Gruet has been crafting affordable sparklers that have the finesse of their French counterparts but at a fraction of the price. Their Blanc de Noirs (translated "white from reds") is made primarily from Pinot Noir, which gives the wine flavors of red berries and the power to stand up to heartier fare like salmon and poultry. The NV stands for Non Vintage and means the wine is a blend of various harvests and intended to be an expression of the winery's style, not the vintage. —Laurie Forster

Laurie Forster, The Wine Coach®, is a wine educator who creates corporate events, group tastings and team-building seminars. She is the author of "The Sipping Point: A Crash Course in Wine," and can be heard each week on WBAL Radio 1090AM. Visit thewinecoach.com.

