

Galena Cellars Winery

Food with Personality for Wine with Terroir

By Sunil Malapati

The French have a fancy term for wine called terroir, which simply means you can taste the land and the conditions under which the grape was grown and harvested. When you transplant a vine in a new land, it eventually adapts to its new terroir and takes on a new personality. The past few decades have certainly seen the Driftless region adapt grapes for our conditions, with some excellent results. Galena Cellars has had three decades of experience and serves over 40 wines, with several awards to boot. A new downtown location on Main St. allowed them to expand into serving food to go with their wines. And they found in Chef Fernando a story that complements their own beautifully!

Chef Escalante Fernando Hetzon brings experiences from around the globe to the menu he developed for Galena Cellars. He worked on cruise ships for half a decade visiting various countries, but especially Spain and the Mediterranean.



He spent more than a decade in Brazil. More recently, he worked at the Morocco Supper Club in Dubuque and became familiar with the Midwestern palate. The small bites menu Chef Fernando developed works both to complement the wines and drinks and also reflects to showcase the chef's personality; our group was both surprised and delighted by many of the offerings that went above and beyond the bar food typical of these venues.

Before we talk about food, let me briefly describe the drink offerings for they are the whole reason this establishment exists! There are more than 40 wines ranging from dry reds and whites, semi-sweet and dessert wines, and fruity wines traditionally identified with the Midwest. There are unusual wines such as the Jalapeno wine and Red Raspberry Framboise that are worth sampling. You can sample small portions of wines in flights or order a whole glass. The wines are also incorporated into

several excellent cocktails, with knowledgeable staff to guide you through the choices. Kristina got a colorful Royal Sundown that paired the juniper notes of Empress Gin with the fruity notes of Galena Cellars Sparkling Muscat, pineapple juice, and grenadine. I particularly liked the Jalapeno Bloody Mary that used Jalapeno wine and General Reserve's White instead of vodka; the jalapeno bite was quite welcome instead of the oily vodka bite I dislike.

"Small Bites" are designed to be food you nosh on while sampling the wines—they need to pack a flavor punch in a bite, yet not compete with the wines themselves. It is quite astonishing how creative Chef Fernando is working with these limitations; he does himself a favor by incorporating the wines in subtle ways throughout the menu. Let us start with a sauce that accompanies some of the dishes: a pineapple jelly that incorporates Jalapeno wine. I tasted the wine



CHICKEN & BACON KEBABS, ERIC THE RED STEAK BITES, AND ROYAL SUNDOWN COCKTAIL



with its lingering delicate heat, and the same delicate heat is in the jelly. The Latin combination of pepper heat and fruit adds a tropical note that helps seafood shine whether it is kebabs (see below) or the visually stunning Shrimp on the Line. Five jumbo shrimp are breaded with sesame seeds incorporated into the breading and deep-fried and hung with clothespins, a very theatrical presentation that delivers in taste what it promises. I paired it with the General's Reserve White; the food and wine complementing each other.

The kebabs offer both variety and a delectable fusion of Mediterranean and Latin flavors. The Scallops and Shrimp kebabs are marinated in fresh herbs and perfectly grilled, the inherent sweetness of the seafood enhanced by the aforementioned jelly. The Chicken and Bacon kebabs add an extra layer of flavor by wrapping the chicken in smoked bacon, the juicy chicken readily absorbing the smoke. The



SHRIMP ON THE LINE, LEBANESE NACHOS, AND CEVICHE GALLEGO

absolute standout for me was the Chorizo and Patatas kebabs, with homemade sausage and Peruvian purple potatoes with chimichurri marinade. Locally-sourced pork from Tom Arnold's farm is seasoned with garlic and spices and perfectly charred, the resulting flavor both deep and delicate with none of the overwhelming garlic notes chorizo typically has. The chimichurri sauce with leeks, green onions, cilantro, garlic, red wine, and apple cider vinegar, among other ingredients, is gorgeously balanced and tamed over the grill, eschewing the raw punch for a long lingering finish. I would almost pick these kebabs for the best showcase of Chef Fernando's mastery of flavor if it weren't for...

Ceviche Gallego! Often mislabeled as "uncooked seafood," classic ceviche has seafood marinated in citrus juices and served cold with no exposure to heat at any stage. The acid in citrus juices, helped along by red wine vinegar in this case, "cooks" the shrimp more delicately than heat. The luscious shrimp are complemented by perfectly diced red onion, cucumber, avocado, tomato, and cilantro, and served with fried plantain chips. You can taste the decade of Brazilian experience in this expertly assembled dish, fun to share with friends or if you are me, keep it all to myself!

Eric the Red Steak Bites! Another knockout showcase, now with a Mediterranean flavor and classic French techniques. Tenderloin steak bites are marinated in a chimichurri sauce and expertly grilled to showcase the deep, rich flavors of beef and accompanied by one of the best red wine sauces I have ever tasted. The sauce is

made with their flagship Eric the Red wine cooked down with shallots, garlic, cream, and Mediterranean spices such as oregano and marjoram; redolent of an evening on the Spanish coast. The sauce is so good it is a crime to not use it on other items on the menu! May I suggest it also go on the Bison Sliders? As flavorful as the sliders were, this sauce could add juiciness to the lean and gamy bison, transporting the good sliders into something astonishing.

The Mediterranean shows up more explicitly in the intriguing Lebanese Nachos. Inspired by Chef Fernando's time in Santorini, a port in Greece, the nachos start with a pita bread base. Pita triangles are baked and then deep fried so they do not get soggy and can stand up to the homemade hummus, lamb, and beef shawarma-like slices, diced cucumbers and tomatoes, sliced Kalamata and Spanish olives, and topped with mint and feta cheese. The brininess of feta and olives with the astringency of olives provides the right counterpoint to red meat and creamy hummus.

A good wine bar needs a good charcuterie board, especially if you want to sample multiple wines and do not want to exhaust your palate. One might think a chef's role is limited to tasting and assembling the cheeses, meats, fruits, and nuts on a charcuterie board; Chef Fernando has come up with a wonderful way to infuse his personality onto the board. The fig jam served with the Cheese & Charcuterie Board uses the dark deep chocolate notes of the Frontenac Port wine and pairs them with subtle berry notes of strawberry and blueberry, fusing the Mediterranean with

the Midwest. The port and berry notes successfully tame the flat melon notes characteristic of pure figs. Similarly, the balsamic fig glaze used in Burrata al Pesto enhances the honeyed notes of fig by additional honey and balancing it with the dark sour notes of balsamic vinegar and tamarind.

I am always excited to discover a chef's personality through their food. Chef Fernando was kind enough to talk to me through his process, and I was impressed by both the thought and experience that went into designing and executing the menu. The menu expertly threads the needle of what is expected from a wine bar and letting the chef's culinary history shine. When asked about future plans, the chef indicated he wants to have weekly specials that would pair wine with food. The current Eric the Red Steak Bites would of course pair perfectly with Eric the Red, but they are even better with the Marquette, an Upper Mississippi Valley Red with smooth tannins that complement the unctuous red wine sauce. I have no doubt Chef Fernando will design dishes that would perfectly complement whatever wine he wishes to showcase.

Chef Fernando also assured me that he would be updating the menu every month to reflect the changing seasons as well as incorporate more local produce. I have no doubt the food will reflect the complex nature of terroir, speaking of both the land we are on and the culinary history the chef brings to it. I look forward to discovering what delicacies the chef whips up! I guess I will have to make the trip to Galena more frequently... could I wish the place were closer? ■



Galena Cellars Winery (Downtown)

111 N MAIN ST, GALENA, IL
815-777-3330

GALENACELLARS.COM

Kitchen Hours: Mon–Thu: Noon–7 PM;
Fri–Sat: Noon–8 PM; Sun: Noon–6 PM

SUNIL MALAPATI

SUNIL IS NERDY ABOUT ALL THINGS FOOD, SCIENCE, FOOD SCIENCE AND THEATRE. HE WILL GLADLY ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS (AS WELL AS BORE YOU WITH FOOD LORE) IF YOU EMAIL HIM AT DINING@DUBUQUE365.COM.

