Happy Birthday, Manny

MANUEL'S turns 50, farmers market steel head pairs with Pinot, and a Bricchino Malvasia

Like many food lovers—and wine lovers—in town, I miss Manny and Alice Santana. Manny was an Olmac-huge, sexy guy who adored life and all the good things in it. Alice was a smart and funny woman, loaded with exquisite taste and enough of a sense of humor to put up with Manuel. Together they shaped some of the better aspects of our region, including helping to mastermind and support the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, farm workers collectives, and believing that ruling minds should find each other. And they did—many of them in the Spanish California gardens of Jardines de San Juan, where Manny loved to hold forth with guests. One year we had so much fun sampling his collection of French Bordeaux that we barely made it to the Mission for the last concert of the above-mentioned CabMuFest. But it was Manuel’s in Aptos that formed the sacred heart of their domain, a well-heeled heart of delicious Mexican food, tweedier margaritas, and ambiance that few restaurants can ever manage. Through those doors passed politicians, virtuoso musicians, filmmakers, outlaws, bohemians, writers, lovers and neighbors who couldn’t get enough of their exceptional host and those gospy, glorious chile rellenos. Okay, long preamble, here’s the pitch: March 8-15, current Manuel’s owners Leonardo and Patricia Santana will honor the landmark restaurant by donating 60 percent of sales to Manny and Alice’s favorite organizations. Make plans!

Pinot Noir 2012

Last week’s farmers market steelhead catch provided an excuse to open a bottle of Lester Family Vineyards Pinot Noir 2012 from Alfaro Family Vineyards. Such a lovely spice-laden partner to bold sea foods or pork roast. The licorice nose yields to a mint and plum center. After about a half hour, the pinot began to suggest bay leaves and ultimately, cherry pie. The 13.5 percent alcohol is just enough to deliver intriguing flavors, but not enough to tire the palate. And speaking of Alfaro, coming up on March 6 Cabrillo Culinary Arts students can join hosts Richard and Mary Kay Alfaro for a tour and tasting at the Corralitos-based vineyards from 1:30-3 p.m. The following day the workshop continues at a ”Pairing Wines with Appetizers” class in Cabrillo Room 908. $130 for tour and workshop, ($35 materials payable at class). This class, through the Cabrillo College Extension, is led by Anne Balickiowski, professional baker, culinary educator and author of Easy Artisan: Simple Elegant Recipes for the Everyday Cook. Check the Cabrillo Extension webpages for registration.

Liquid Poetry

Playful and fragrant, with a honeysuckle opening into fields of wildflowers—that’s Bricchino Malvasia Bianca 2013, liquid poetry from Monterey grapes. Peach and lychee hint the central stream of this intricate 13 percent-alcohol wine. It evolves in the glass, showing sparks of citrus, lavender and melon, before its crisp finish. No wonder the New York Times paid serious attention recently to this creation from local winemakers Alex Krause and John Locke. To be savored for sure, but also a springtime delight with spicy foods, roasted almonds, Camembert, cornichons, and Thai food. Available at Whole Foods, etc.

Quickies

True fact—I never leave the country without a few of those small “airline” bottles of Fernet Branca (Shoppers has ‘em). This Italian bitters is not only a world-class digestif, its strange and exhilarating flavor has been known to ward off jet lag. It does, if you want it to ... Starting March 1 you’ll be able to feast on mega-designer pastries from Manresa’s new patisserie at our local Verve coffee emporium. Double-check if you get my drift.

PHOTO: Manny and Alice Santana dance at his 70th birthday party, some 20 years ago.