



Bordering on culinary genius

Chris Ludwick
carries catering
to a new level

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PHOTOS ROBBI PENGELLY

If there were a Nobel Prize for sauces (some people will say there should be), Chris Ludwick would be a serious contender.

Take the list of sauces you think you love and throw it away. Then try this:

Buy a bottle of 2006 BR Cohn North Coast Petite Sirah and drink a glass or two; you'll like it. Save at least a cup and set it aside.

Heat some olive oil in a sauce pan, add half a cup of chopped onion and four cloves of chopped garlic and heat until they're translucent. Add a cup of veal stock, half a cup of the wine and reduce by one-half.

You may be tempted along the way to add some more wine. Just don't tell Chris. When the mixture has reached sauce consistency, stir in two tablespoons of butter until it's completely melted. Strain it. You will now have something the color of a plum and the consistency of thin baby food.

Now take a deep breath, dip a spoon into the sauce and put it on your tongue.

Three words: Yum, yum, and yum.

If you do it the way Chris does you will now be tasting a sauce with multiple layers of lavish complexity, deep flavors of blackberry, toasted oak, maybe some



Secret sauce (above) could be an appetizer. Appetizer (top) could be a meal.

dark peat, a hint of cranberry, a touch of tobacco. It's as if you took the most intensely rich red wine, added some complementary flavors and then hit the quadruple button so that every nuance of taste was magnified 400 percent.

If you don't think this sauce breaches the border of culinary genius, then go back to your Big Mac and fries.

Chris Ludwick owns, with his wife, Amy, the Grapevine Catering Company which won the Best of Show award in September for the ultimate appetizer at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair's food competition. It would be fair to conclude that the prize was presented for the sauce, but that would ignore the other three-quarters of the winning recipe. What went with the sauce was a delectable leek fondue upon which Chris placed delicate slices of perfectly roasted and seasoned lamb loin. The lamb was then slathered with the petite sirah sauce and garnished with a salsa of fresh herbs. The ingredients blended in a symphony of flavor that still let the taste of the lamb slip through.

Work your way through one helping and you'll conclude that the sauce alone is an appetizer and the appetizer would make a memorable meal. For Chris, winning was not entirely a surprise. At last year's

competition he won gold medals for Best Use of Seafood and Best Use of Sonoma County Wine.

He's been cooking for 20 years, has worked as chef at several Bay Area restaurants and does food and wine pairings for BR Cohn, Flora Springs and other wineries. In 2002 he and Amy moved to wine country and started their own business. He's now the "preferred" caterer at Ramekins in Sonoma and sometimes teaches classes there. A graduate of the California Culinary Academy, Chris says his driving goal is to "create fine restaurant quality food at catered events."

Chris cooks with the focus and intensity of an artist and experiments with flavor combinations in his home kitchen. He says he came up with the recipe for the winning lamb dish while driving in his car just hours before the contest deadline. He chose it, he says, for its simplicity, and for the variety of sauces and garnishes it required.

If you want to take a stab at the full recipe, you'll find it on Chris's Web site. Just try to save some sauce for the lamb. **S**

Recipes are online at www.grapevinecatering.com; click on the menu link.