

IN THE PINK A SYBARITIC & SCIENTIFIC SATURDAY

Sarah Leah Chase

Were I to be asked to rewrite the lyrics to the song, *My Favorite Things*, sung by Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, I'd probably do away with "raindrops on roses" (especially in June on Nantucket), "warm woolen mittens," and "wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings." Instead, I would cite Billecart-Salmon Champagne bubbles, truffles and foie gras, oysters on the half shell, and glasses brimming with Grüner Veltliner and Burgundian-style Pinot Noir wines. Never in my wildest dreams would I expect to be treated to all these epicurean indulgences in one fell swoop, but such was exactly my fine fortune when I was easily seduced into attending the events that **Camille Broderick** had curated for the **Nantucket Culinary Center's** first Wine & Food extravaganza throughout the weekend prior to Memorial Day.

I first met Camille last year in June when she invited me to be a guest on Camille's Demi-Hour, the Nantucket NPR 89.5 FM program she hosts, airing at 1:30 in the afternoon on Saturdays and Sundays throughout the summer season. Camille initially designed her program to showcase the talents of island-based food mavens and restaurateurs, but now will also occasionally intersperse the local bounty with interviews featuring visiting winemakers, Michelin-starred chefs, and cookbook authors. I was at once enchanted by Camille's far-reaching and eclectic food-world knowledge and intriguing résumé experiences. I was equally impressed by her fresh and unpretentious exuberance -- all qualities that continued to shine throughout the afternoon and late into the evening on Saturday, May 20th in the classroom at the Culinary Center.



Hamachi foie gras and black truffle mille-feuille



While I am one who normally only pops the corks on fine bottles of French Champagne at momentous occasions, my habits were upended when I was poured a welcoming glass of *Champagne Billecart -- Salmon Extra Brut* at 3 p.m. on this sunny springtime Saturday afternoon. How naïve of me to think that truffles would outshine Champagne at a seminar that had been billed as: The American Truffle Revolution with Michelin Star Chef **Gabriel Kreuther** and Champagne Billecart-Salmon. Billecart-Salmon's charming young French ambassador, **Clement Calleja**, soon took the stage to enlighten us about everything Billecart, the oldest continually run independent family house in Champagne. The company was fortuitously founded in 1818, Clement explained, when Nicolas François Billecart and Elizabeth Salmon became husband and wife, as "Monsieur Billecart had the grapes and Madame Salmon the money." Today Billecart-Salmon is run by the 6th generation of the same family, father Antoine Roland-Billecart and his son Jean Roland-Billecart. Ancestral vinification methods are still employed and perfected with each new generation.



Camille and Clement



Billecart Sous Bois Champagne



Gabriel Kreuther

Clement went on to explain that the Extra Brut Champagne in our glasses was originally crafted at the request of famed Parisian chef Guy Savoy and its balance of freshness, fruit, acidity, and elegance is specifically designed for pairing with refined gastronomy. Another hallmark of Billecart Extra Brut is its fermentation at very low, almost freezing temperatures, and the idea that it is considered "healthy" to drink because it contains zero sugar. This was the first of many scientific insights that would be shared throughout the day to enlighten our minds about the pleasures we were experiencing on our palate. And, indeed, what pleasures they were! While Clement waxed eloquent about the premier and grand crus grapes used exclusively in the making of all Billecart-Salmon Champagnes, **Gabriel Kreuther** quietly busied himself with professional precision in plating our first course -- a luxurious *mille-feuille* layeringhamachi, with foie gras and black truffles, a signature dish on the menu at his eponymous restaurant overlooking Bryant Park in Midtown Manhattan. When New York Times restaurant critic Pete Wells wrote his 3-star review of the restaurant after it had just opened in 2015, he noted: "Any foie gras from Mr. Kreuther's kitchen is pretty much guaranteed to be wonderful." No attendee among the Culinary Center's sold-out crowd -- immersed in sipping, savoring, and swooning at pink peony adorned tables -- begged to differ.

Next, it was time to take a bit of a gastronomic break and tune our ears to learning about the American Truffle Revolution being passionately pioneered by Robert Chang in America and Dr. Paul Thomas in England, the two adhering to the motto of: Science + Knowledge = Success. Chang, who lives in San Francisco and holds an MBA from the Stanford Business School, had travelled across the country to Nantucket to share with us the wizardry behind The American Truffle Company he founded in 2007. Mind you, the company has yet to harvest and sell an American truffle, but Chang believes the moment of truffle truth to be just around the bend. Chang explained that successful truffle cultivation requires extensive scientific knowledge, which is for the most part unavailable in the public domain, and such explains why there is close to a 98% failure rate among other would-be truffle growing experiments and enterprises. Enter partner Dr. Paul Thomas, who has been researching European truffles since 2001 and after completing doctorate work was awarded a grant to commercialize the technology he developed to inoculate trees with numerous types of truffle species.



Robert Chang

The genius of the American Truffle Company is in its pairing with client/partners all over the world to operate independent truffle orchards using the founders' closely guarded truffle technology, cultivation expertise, and distribution savvy. Financially, the company is structured to take less than a third of the gross truffle revenue the client/partners generate once the truffles begin producing. Despite the fact that it takes 5 to 6 years for truffle orchards to begin producing, I am sure I wasn't the only one in the room dreaming of cultivating my own truffle orchard in partnership with the American Truffle Company.

As riveting as truffle talk can be, it cannot compare with eating the earthy and aromatic fungi and Gabriel Kreuther's second course pairing of raviolis stuffed with pureed chestnuts and mascarpone afloat in a silky black truffle sauce managed to be even more ethereal than the first course. The *Champagne Billecart-Salmon Vintage 2006* being poured added to the ecstasy, as these were the only bottles of this vintage available in the entire state of Massachusetts. Clement had selected this particular 11-year-old Champagne as a pairing because its age made it creamier and yeastier on the palate, qualities that enhance richer, fattier, and more intense dishes. Chef Kreuther elaborated on his approach to truffle cookery stressing that seasoning with the right amount of pepper is vital to bringing forth the best expression of a truffle's essence. He also shared that black truffles need to be peeled just like potatoes because their skins contain an acidity that takes away from "true truffleness." Because truffles are so exorbitantly expensive, Kreuther makes jus with the peelings and finely juliennes the skins for visual appeal and garnish on his restaurant's truffle specialties.

To cap off the decadence of the afternoon, the charismatic Chef Kreuther wowed all with an unusually brilliant ingredient assemblage in squat mason jars, a cooking technique that had brought him great acclaim during the 10 years he commanded the kitchen at The Modern, a top-notch restaurant overlooking the lush garden courtyard at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. The splendid creation of Giant Tarbais Beans and Truffles topped dramatically with a German Potato Mousseline paid homage to Kreuther's upbringing in the Alsace



Mason jar tarbais beans with truffles

region of French and was reflective of the many Alsatian specialties he currently enjoys cooking in his own restaurant. Just when one couldn't imagine things becoming any rosier, Clement reappeared to fill glasses anew with *Champagne Billecart-Salmon Rosé*, which in the rarified confines of this particular afternoon served as a logical segue to a final farewell and surprise celebratory toast with additional Champagne, of course!

After all, throughout the entire progression of the afternoon, Clement had recommended that everyone should have at least one bottle of Champagne in the refrigerator at all times. In fact, he cautioned: "No celebration should go without Champagne, no meal, no day, no breakfast, no bathtub soak . . . A special occasion can simply be the fact of having a bottle of Champagne in the refrigerator!" And so our seminar ended with magnums of Billecart-Salmon's most unique cuvée, *Brut Sous Bois*, launched recently in 2010 and sporting an equal blending of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier grapes. Each of these classic Champagne grape varieties is fermented and aged separately in toasted oak barrels from Burgundy (*sous bois*-- means "under wood"), four different vintages are then selected to make the cuvée, which then

must age 5 years in the bottle before being released onto the market. With so much science and sybaritism blended into every effervescent bubble, I made sure to listen intently to a final piece of parting advice from Clement: "Champagne always tastes better when poured from magnum bottles because twice as much oxidation takes place and the greater amount of glass surface allows the lees to spread out."

Maybe some day, I'll have a truffle orchard and always, always, keep a magnum of noteworthy Champagne in my refrigerator. Or maybe, I'll make it a bit easier and more expedient by just treating myself to a dinner in New York at Gabriel Kreuther. Not a bad bucket list, if I do say so myself.

(The remaining favorite things - oysters on the half shell and glasses brimming with Grüner Veltliner and Burgundian-style Pinot Noir wines - will be featured in a Part II follow-up to this Part 1 of my Sybaritic & Scientific Saturday. Stay tuned.

Sarah Leah Chase is a cookbook author, freelance food writer, and culinary consultant. She frequently teaches cooking classes at the Nantucket Culinary Center. Her latest cookbook, "New England Open House," was published this past June. She invites fellow food lovers to follow her on Facebook and Instagram.