

## A life of wine

### Former Tulsan now works with famous label

By **MATT GLEASON**  
World Scene Writer

At 13 or 14, Gillian Ballance got drunk for the first time. Maybe the oxidized culprit was a dusty bottle of Lancers, or perhaps it was the Mateus. Either way, it tasted awful.



Ballance

But, really, that's what two friends get when they go digging in a parent's wine stash. Many years later, that same Tulsa girl is a respected 38-year-old wine director for the San Francisco outfit, PlumpJack Group, which operates, among other things, two wineries and seven restaurants. It also boasts a number of Wine Spectator Best of Awards for Excellence.

In the years that separated a young girl drunk on a lousy bottle of wine, and her older self, who speaks of Napa Valley as if it were the Elysian fields, there was an aspiring ballerina — one who saw the world from atop her tiptoes at the Tulsa School of Ballet and later New York University.

Actually, it wasn't until 1991, when a white Lexus plowed into Ballance as she tried to cross a street in midtown New York, that a broken tailbone changed her career path.

Sure, Ballance could have kept dancing, but her injury served a greater purpose by easing Ballance out of her ballerina slippers and into the wine cellar.

First, however, there was a waitressing gig on a four-hour contract that motored from the Hudson River into the East River and back again.

The pre-cooked food was "horrible," Ballance recalled, but at least she reveled in the gorgeous view.

Later, Ballance ended up seeing the metropolis from a different angle, one found high atop Rockefeller Center's heralded Rainbow Room.

While there, the same girl who learned to appreciate fine wine in her grandparents' Long Island home took a 21-week sommelier certification course.

During long breaks at the Rainbow, Ballance and her wine books could be found cozied up in a linen closet. Later, the Rainbow's head bartender, Dale DeGroff, introduced Ballance to Andrea Immer, the woman who ultimately gave Ballance her first job as an assistant cellar master at the ill-fated Windows on the World in 1993.

Not long after, Ballance graduated to cellar master, which meant she oversaw a cache of roughly 150,000 bottles.

One of the best lessons Ballance learned while on the job was, as she said, "Don't make up an answer for the sake of answering a question."

After all, some customers are sharp when it comes to wine.

"Probably 20 years ago, there were a lot of gullible people who didn't know

### Gillian Ballance's two wine tips:

#### In the restaurant:

Match the style and body of a dish to that of the wine. That is really the most basic and easiest principle to think about.

We try to emphasize that if somebody has a steak with a big red wine sauce, what are you naturally going to suggest? Probably cabernet sauvignon or syrah. Or if people are having salads and shellfish — lighter dishes — you're going to want to suggest more fruit-driven, youthful, crisp white wines.

#### At home:

Find a great retailer. Find somebody who you trust.

And try to hone in on what it is that you like about certain wines and what you don't like about others.

If you can convey that to the person you're buying wine from, you should be able to start a good relationship where you can then trust and rely on that person to broaden your horizons, introduce you to new things that you might like so you keep learning and tasting different things.

much at all, but it's changed," she said. "Wine is just becoming more of an acceptable beverage."

Heck, the red and white stuff has battled liquor to an almost 50/50 split of customers' tastes, she said.

Years later, Ballance left behind the luxurious Bacara Resort in Santa Barbara, Calif., in favor of PlumpJack — Queen Elizabeth's nickname for Shakespeare's rotund Falstaff.

Founded by San Francisco's dashing mayor, Gavin Newsom, PlumpJack's philosophy is, essentially: "Why do I have to spend \$1,000 on a bottle of wine? Why can't things be more accessible? Why can't we drink great wines at reasonable prices?"

For instance, PlumpJack offers \$60 or \$70 bottles of wine that would easily sell for twice that, or more, in some ritzy joints.

OK, so let's say Ballance wants to give a bottle of wine to her father, who was known to enjoy a bottle of sangria when she was growing up. What fine wine would she choose?

"Probably one of the PlumpJack reserve wines," she said, "because they age beautifully and they are just really well-made."

"It's definitely one of my favorite wines in Napa, for sure. I know that it's our own brand, but it's a spectacular wine."

Although Ballance's life in ballerina slippers pretty much ended in a midtown intersection, she has since noticed an interesting trend in the wine trade: It attracts creative types.

"A lot of the people who I meet in the wine business were, in fact, musicians, or artists, or people doing things creatively," she said, "because I think you have to have a lot of passion to devote yourself to something."

"And if you devote yourself to wine, it's obviously because you have quite a bit of passion for it, because unless you own 30 acres in Napa Valley, you can't really make a lot of money."

True, but at least you can always drink well.

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MIKE SIMONS / Tulsa World

The waitstaff at McNellie's downtown can help you pair beer with your food. This McNellie's chocolate torte is paired with a fruity Unibroue Quelque Chose beer.

# Lager lessons

## Some beer styles match food better than others

By **NATALIE MIKLES**  
World Scene Writer

Even those who don't drink wine know the basics of wine pairing. Whites go with chicken and fish. Reds go with beef. Sure, it's a generalization, but at least it gives novices a starting place.

But what about beer? "A lot of people think 'A beer's a beer,'" said William Shawn Scott, a home brewer and member of the Fellowship of Oklahoma Ale Makers.

But Scott says that just like with wine, there are beers for every type of food, and also like wine, the right beer changes the overall experience of the meal.

"Wine has always enjoyed a reputation of being more sophisticated than beer, but that's starting to change," Scott said.

As a judge for amateur beer-making contests, Scott said he judges 23 major categories with 79 subcategories of beer styles. So anyone who thinks 'a beer's a beer' is missing the nuances of flavor in the beers that go beyond Bud.

When pairing beer with food, Scott says there are a few general rules of thumb: Pair sweet beers with sweeter foods. Pair tart beers with sharp foods. Pair strong beers with more robust foods. This is to complement the taste and to keep flavors from overwhelming each other.

"But there are no hard and fast rules," Scott said. "You're not going to make a faux

pas or a social mistake. I encourage people to try new beers to see what they like."

Pair this steak with Choc's Miner's Mishap for a casual dinner party.

Sirloin Steak  
with Chimichurri Sauce

Serves 4

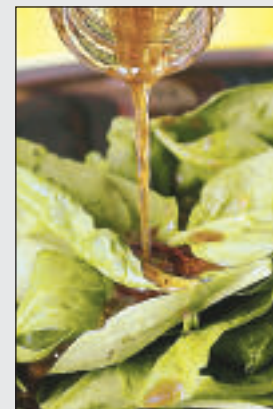
- ¼ cup chopped parsley (about 1 large bunch)
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup fresh lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped garlic
- 2 teaspoons hot red pepper flakes
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1½ pounds beef tenderloin steaks, each about 1-inch thick

1. Put the parsley in a bowl and whisk in the olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, hot pepper and salt to taste. Taste and adjust the seasoning if necessary; let the sauce rest at room temperature for an hour or two if you have time.

2. Put a large skillet over high heat; season the steaks with salt and pepper. When the skillet is hot, a minute or two later, add the steaks and cook for about 3 minutes per side for medium-rare, a little longer for more well done. Serve the steaks whole or slice them; serve with the chimichurri spooned over them, passing more sauce at the table.

"Mark Bittman's Quick and Easy Recipes from *The New York Times*" by Mark Bittman

Pair ... with



**Green salad with vinaigrette** — Flanders red ale, such as Rodenbach or Duchess de Bourgogne



**Pot roast** — Dark lager, such as Choc's Miner's Mishap

**Baguette and a hunk of cheese** — Saison, a farmhouse Belgian ale, such

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