



THE PERFECT PAIRING

by Ellen “EJ” Sackett

Ancient Ovens and Arché Winery go together perfectly, just like the homemade artisan bread and the fine wine they serve. Together they form the ideal date night, just an hour-and-a-half drive northwest from Dallas and Fort Worth—away from work, kids and the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Both are classic examples of “if you build it, they will come,” and the word is spreading about these hidden gems. Tucked away north of Saint Jo, they are located in what is unofficially called the North Texas Hill Country. Better known as the Red River Valley, the terrain resembles Central Texas with its gentle slopes and pastoral views. Squint and you might even believe you’re in Italy.

Hosts for the evening are Howard Davies and Amy Sterling, owners of Arché Wines and Oak Creek Vineyards, and Denis and Susan Moody, whose home is the backdrop for Ancient Ovens. The two couples are not business partners, but good neighbors who live a few miles apart. Their combined vision is to create a memorable, magical experience for their guests.

The adventure begins at Arché. Visitors arrive at the winery in the late afternoon for a taste of red or rosé and a leisurely tour of the Oak Creek Vineyards. Arché sells its estate wine by the bottle or the case, and guests continuing to Ancient Ovens often buy some to complement their Old World Italian-style, oven-fired dinner.

Just five minutes away is Ancient Ovens at BlueDog Vista Ranch. From the Lookout deck, guests enjoy being served a family-style, five-course meal while the sun slowly disappears over Devil’s Backbone.

Before long, strangers become friends. A light evening breeze crosses the valley and cools the night air. Under the tiny white patio lights, all the elements meld into one consummate, unforgettable evening.

Arché

Howard Davies’s first grape-growing experience began in his backyard when he was in his twenties, and his love for the grape followed him throughout his life. After a family vacation in Napa, California twelve years ago, Howard’s wife Amy encouraged him to pursue his passion and suggested a life of growing grapes commercially. They looked for land within a fifty-mile radius of their Plano home, but found it to be cost prohibitive, so they expanded their search. Finally they found what they were looking for—115 acres conducive to growing grapes, including an abandoned vineyard.

In three short months, they cleared the property of bramble, greenbriers and scrub oak trees and replanted the wild Venus vines inherited from the original vineyard. The forty-seven more rows of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, and Syrah grapevines were added, more than doubling the size of Oak Creek Vineyard, and there are plans to add additional rows this year.

Arché may well be the smallest commercial winery in Texas. The entire facility, including the tasting room, is all of 300 square feet. Visitors to Arché Winery literally walk into the factory, whatever stage of wine making is in progress. “At any given time, any number of winery operations might be going on,” says Amy. “We might be bottling, or pressing wine or doing some kind of chemical analysis.”

Photos courtesy of Arché Winery & Ancient Ovens

Remarkably, all of Arché wine is made from its own grapes. Currently Arché produces approximately 500 cases of estate wine a year, which are available only through the winery. Its varietals and blends are made from Syrah, Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon as well as the hearty, but less commonly known Roussane, Mourvèdre, Granache and Carignan grapes. Most of the rootstock came from California, but these grape varieties originate from the Bordeaux and Rhone regions of France and the northern regions of Italy. “Those regions are more like our region,” Howard says. “These particular grapes can take the heat.”

The wine choices vary because the grapes vary from year to year. This year’s wine choices are Syrah and Cabernet wines from the Ryan’s Red series, named for Howard and Amy’s middle son; Texas Rose, a popular semi-sweet wine; and Nouveau Montague 2009, a dry red-blend table wine.

The art and science of growing grapes and making wine (not to mention the business of meeting federal and state regulatory standards) keep Howard and Amy on their toes twelve months of the year. The process is labor-intensive and never-ending.

Says Amy, “We start pruning in December, and we tend the vines into harvest,” which happens mainly in August, September and October. “Then we’re working pretty heavily making wine between harvest and pruning time.” Any one of a number of variables, like a draught, black rot, a late frost or a nearby 2,4-D crop dusting can send their best-laid plans plummeting.

With the precarious life of a viticulturist, a sense of adventure comes with the territory. There’s a bit of the daredevil in both Howard and Amy, who met while racing motorcycles competitively. They left their stable jobs and suburban lifestyle to pursue their dream in the country and downsized from a 2,600-square-foot house to their current 350-square-foot home. “The easy part was making the decision,” says Howard. “The hard part was doing it.”

Even making the decision about what vines to plant is a gamble, as there is no guarantee what will thrive. But the risk is also the thrill and what keeps it interesting. “We experiment to see what works,” says Howard. “Everything changes every year, and we have to be ready for it.”

Howard and Amy’s sons were also bit by the bug. Patrick is the winemaker at Eagle Castle Winery in Paso Robles, California. “He’s my authority,” says Howard. Ryan helped plant many of the grapevines in record time and designed the Arché label logo, and youngest son Grayson works part-time for his parents and is currently pursuing a degree in horticulture with a concentration in viticulture at Texas Tech.

A spirited conversation about the particulars of viticulture comes with the tour. Howard and Amy love to share what they know. For four years Howard was the Region 2 Vineyard Director for Texas Wine and Grape Growers Association, covering 54 counties in Texas. He also authored a booklet, “The Starting Point”, which explains how to start

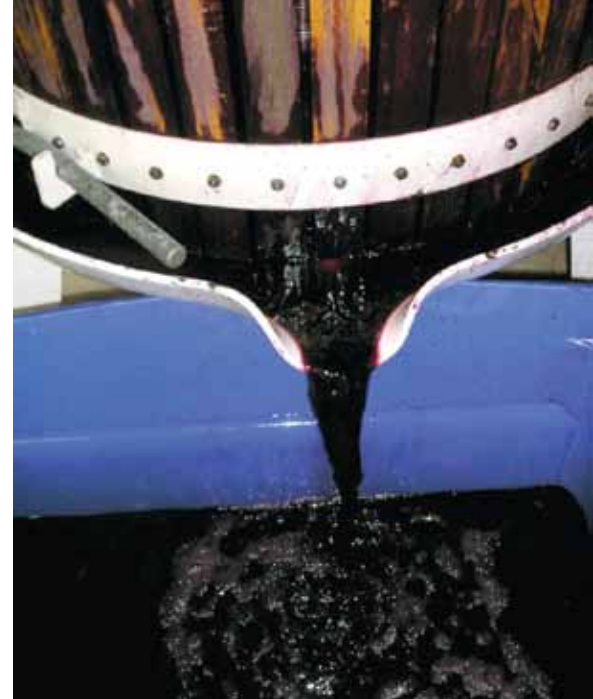
a vineyard in Texas. Says Howard, “This booklet tells you everything. It tells you where to go, who you should talk to, what region you’re in, who to contact...” With a smile he adds, “I’ll tell you more than you want to know. Amy will tell you exactly what you *need* to know.”

The time flies by and dinner awaits. Head back from whence you came, turn left at the next gravel road. Look for a black, bashed-in mailbox on your right. Another episode is about to begin.

Ancient Ovens

The centerpiece and the reason to visit Ancient Ovens is the wood-fired oven itself. Denis built the oven in three months and finished it in February, 2007. Surrounded by rock and brick, it stands nearly ten feet tall, eight feet deep and six feet wide. The inside space, which includes the walls, hearth and arches, can handle as many as five pizzas or twenty loaves of bread at one time. Constructed from 330 fire bricks that retain the heat necessary for this Old World method of baking, the oven can heat up to 850 degrees, baking the pizzas to a bubbly crisp within minutes. Denis tends the fire and cooks the meal here, while





intrigued onlookers sit on benches under the covered pavilion.

Denis always dreamt of building an outdoor wood-fired oven like those he saw in his Navy days when he was deployed to Italy for extended stays. “The food is just so good coming out of them,” Denis says. After he retired from the military, he looked for something else to do. One day when Susan was surfing the Internet, she stumbled upon North House School of Folk Learning in Grand Marais, Minnesota, which offered a seminar in how to build the ovens. Denis immediately took the class.

At first Denis intended to build the ovens as his main enterprise—“for other people’s backyards,” he says—but when the housing market tanked, so did his plans. Meanwhile, he built the Lookout, a large deck beyond the oven overlooking the valley.

Susan, who had no previous formal training as a baker, went to North House to take a four-day, wood-fire method baking class. “A lot of it is trial by error and just learning the feel of the oven,” she says. “I can stick my hand in it and without even looking at the thermometer, know if it’s too hot to bake bread. I can just sense it.”

They hosted parties for family and friends and soon were getting requests to host large gatherings at their home. In April, 2009 they officially began doing business full-time as Ancient Ovens with help from their son Chris, who has also learned the art of wood-fired baking, and daughter Eryn, who helps with the preparation and serves the guests.

They perfected what is now their standard five-course meal, which has been modified over time. “Like a lot of restaurants in Italy, we serve one type of meal,” says Denis. “That’s our staple, and we’ve served it for close to a year-and-a-half now. People keep coming back and coming back.”

This meal at Ancient Ovens is bread-based, starting with Susan’s rustic artisan country bread, made from an 80-year-old starter, and served with a rich spinach and artichoke dip glazed with garlic butter in a hot cast iron pan. Next is Susan’s own creation, Italian Teardrops, made with olive cream cheese and spices wrapped in a pasta pastry and sea-

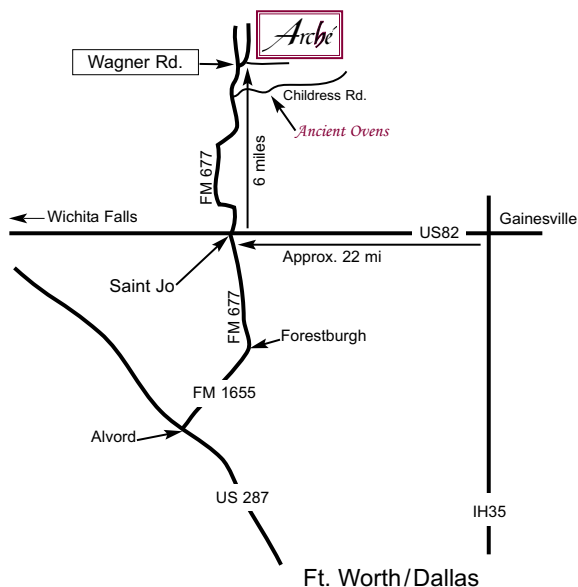
soned with garlic, butter and herbs. For the main course, guests may choose one of the thin-crust Neapolitan-style pizzas, topped with a variety of ingredients depending on what is fresh and available. (With prior notice, Ancient Ovens can accommodate dietary concerns. For example, if someone is lactose intolerant, they will substitute olive oil for the cheese.) The meal is *fnito* with a decadent dark chocolate hazelnut dessert pizza made with Nutella. *Magnifico!*

Many of the ingredients used to make the meal come from Susan’s organic garden, including Roma tomatoes, basil, oregano, rosemary and garlic. They compost hay and add vegetable scraps to worm castings to enrich the soil. “We want to get more sustainable, more local and be more mindful of where our food comes from,” says Susan.

In addition to growing herbs and vegetables, they also raise cattle and free range chickens. Susan uses the eggs in her baked goods and sells them to the local feed store, and they have processed their own chickens as well. The Moodys frequent Fischer’s—“one of the most happening small grocery stores in Texas,” according to Denis—which sells local produce, especially in the spring and summer. Ancient Ovens also buys its Italian sausage and Canadian bacon from Fischer’s, which processes and packages its own sausages and cheeses. He adds, “By patronizing local stores in the community, we’re helping them sustain themselves. It works hand in hand.”

Traveling around the world as a naval officer to 23 different countries during his thirty years of service gave Denis perspective. “Quite a significant portion of the world’s population still lives like this. This is their norm. It made me think,” says Denis. “We lived quite a few years in Euless, and we thought, ‘This is just not us. We’ve got to get out and get some more room,’” says Denis. “I don’t think either one of us ever had a plan to be here, at this level of earthiness, but we sure like it!”

Ancient Ovens is primarily an outdoor venue, but over the past winter, Denis and Chris, with help from Howard, built a kitchen, a teaching space for Susan’s baking classes and an indoor dining room surrounded by glass. This new addition will also include a second wood-fire oven



and year 'round seating and protection from inclement weather.

Rather than driving home late at night, visitors might consider turning the trip into a short staycation by booking a room at the quaint Texas King's Hotel, directly across from Saint Jo's historic town square. Guests stay in one of five charming guestrooms at the inn, renovated from two turn-of-the-century buildings. Because the hotel does not keep regular hours and is only open by arrangement, reservations must be made well in advance.

Finding Arché Winery and Ancient Ovens isn't easy, but follow the map we've included, then remember that once you are on Hwy 677 and you stumble upon your first breathtaking vista, you're almost there.

Arché Winery

228 Wagner Road, Saint Jo, Texas 76265

Tele: (214) 908-9055 or (214) 536-6330

www.archewines.com

Hours: 11 a.m. to dark, Wednesdays through Sundays and by appointment

Wine can be purchased by the bottle or by the case for a 10% discount

No reservations required; Children are welcome but must be supervised.

Ancient Ovens

At BlueDog Vista Ranch, 857 Childress Road, Saint Jo, Texas 76265

Tele: (940) 366-4255

www.ancientovens.com

Hours: 7 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays & Saturdays and by arrangement

Advance reservations by telephone required.

Texas King's Hotel

104 S. Broad Street, Saint Jo, Texas 76265

(940) 995-2565

www.texaskingshotel.com

Hours: By appointment only.

Advance reservations required.

Call or e-mail: reservations@texaskingshotel.com

Susan Moody's Italian Teardrops

1- 8 ounce package cream cheese softened at room temperature

1 package won ton wraps

½ cup green olives

¼ cup butter

1 teaspoon garlic powder

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place the cream cheese and the olives in a food processor and process on the low setting just until the cream cheese is blended and the olives are chopped to a medium consistency. Lay a wonton on a flat surface and place a teaspoonful amount of the cream cheese/olive mixture in the middle. Fold one edge to the opposite corner to make a triangle. Take the ends of the triangle and bring them to the center corner (like folding a diaper). Place on a cookie sheet and continue with the remainder of the mixture and the wontons. Melt the butter and garlic powder together and brush lightly onto the teardrops. Place in the oven and bake at 400 for 15 minutes or until the tops of the wontons are brown.