

LAPIN aux PRUNEAUX with PONZI PINOT NOIR RESERVE

Remember prunes? In the current quest for the freshest, most local, environmentally responsible, exotic heritage or hot new hybrid fruits and vegetables, prunes are rarely mentioned, much less glorified on glossy magazine covers. What a pity this noble and gorgeous fruit has become something of a joke--its luxuriant sweet fresh flavors overlooked, its elegant blue/black color ignored, its juice associated with regularity and old age, its dried appearance derided as in "wrinkled as an old...". Just days before the succulent Italian prunes near our vineyard were harvested, I walked along the orchard's border—the perfume was intoxicating, the huge clusters of deep purple fruit stunningly contrasted against the green leaves and gnarled chocolate brown limbs. Of course I found a perfect plum fallen on the orchard floor...the rich flavors reflected the prune's beauty. The taste recalled a dish enjoyed in the early days of Oregon wines. Pat Campbell of Elk Cove Vineyard introduced me to Lapin aux Pruneaux at a dinner for our small group of ambitious, aspiring winemakers. We frequently gathered for exchange of ideas and observations, the enjoyment of good wines and foods. Our families remain close, and our grandchildren—featuring some budding chefs—will probably make this dish one day. Lapin aux Pruneaux is an ideal match for fine Pinot Noir such as this 2007 Ponzi Pinot Noir Reserve. And—though the French might raise a discerning brow—chicken can successfully substitute for the rabbit.

INGREDIENTS:

1 rabbit, approx. 2 ½ lb., cut into 6 – 8 pieces
 16 Italian prunes
 1 C dry red wine (leftover Pinot noir?) or water
 3 oz. lardons – pork belly, bacon or salt pork, cut to narrow ½ inch strips
 2 T. olive oil
 ¾ C flour
 Kosher salt
 Black pepper, freshly ground
 1 onion, diced
 12 shallots

3 - 4 medium carrots, sliced ¼ inch diagonally
 2 - 3 celery stalks, sliced ¼ inch diagonally
 2 C broth, vegetable or chicken
 2 C dry red wine (preferably an adequate Pinot noir)
 Fresh thyme for garnish

For Marinade:

1 C dry red wine
 Bouquet garni of fresh thyme sprigs, Italian parsley, celery leaves, fresh bay leaves
 6 peppercorns, crushed
 1 large clove garlic, crushed
 2 T olive oil

TECHNIQUE:

1. Combine ingredients for marinade. Either in a sealable plastic bag or deep rimmed dish, marinate the rabbit 4 – 12 hours in the refrigerator.
2. Soak the prunes in the cup of red wine for at least half an hour (or water or combined wine with water).
3. Remove rabbit from marinade (reserve marinade) and pat dry on paper towels.
4. Combine flour, salt and pepper. Dredge rabbit pieces in flour mixture and shake off excess.
5. Heat olive oil in a large sauté pan. Add lardons and sauté until fat is rendered remove and discard lardons.
6. Brown rabbit in oils, working with a few pieces at a time as pan can accommodate. Remove browned rabbit and set aside.
7. In the same sauté pan with oils, add the onion, sauté and leave in the pan.
8. Either in the same sauté pan, if large enough, or using a deeper large heavy bottomed sauce pan, Combine the rabbit, 8 prunes, sautéed onions, carrots, celery, shallots and bouquet garni. Strain the marinade

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and pour over and add sufficient wine and broth to cover. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 1 – 1 ½ hours, watching to add more broth/wine as needed to prevent drying and/or scorching. As the rabbit begins to become tender, remove the bouquet garni and add the other 8 prunes. Simmer at least 15 more minutes or until the rabbit is tender.

9. Remove the rabbit, shallots, carrot slices, celery slices and prunes to pretty casserole or serving platter.
10. Continue cooking the sauce to reduce to desired thickness. If necessary, strain as sauce is poured over the rabbit. Garnish with sprigs of fresh thyme.
11. Accompany with braised rice or rice pilaf, creamy or garlic mashed potatoes, oven browned new potatoes; follow with green salad dressed with light lemon vinaigrette. A small course of triple cream cheeses could nicely conclude the meal while enjoying the remaining 2007 Ponzi Pinot Noir Reserve.