

A Taste for Art

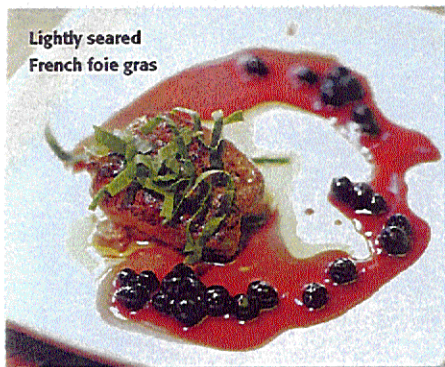
When Atlanta attorney Hubert Bell Jr. and his wife, Eileen Crowley, shelled out \$6,000 to experience dinner for six at Jacksonville's Bistro Aix, they weren't just satisfying a culinary craving. Their winning auction bid went to support Atlanta's High Museum of Art. But chef Tom Gray — who had donated the dinner — was determined to give his guests some art of his own. In fact, he created a masterpiece.

BY CATHERINE ENNS GRIGAS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ED HALL



Smoked salmon



Lightly seared
French foie gras

Chanterelles from California. Foie gras from France. Stone crab claws fresh from Florida waters. The list of ingredients was enough to make any food-loving fanatic salivate, but Bistro Aix executive chef Tom Gray was about to turn those delicacies into a truly exquisite dinner. A \$6,000 dinner, to be exact.

It was a frenzy of live auction bidding activity that skyrocketed the dinner, offered by Gray and his father-in-law, Charles Johnston of the Napa Valley winery Helena View Johnston Vineyards, up into the stratosphere. The two had placed the dinner on the block as part of the annual Wine Auction at Atlanta's High Museum of Art. The winners were Hubert Bell Jr., an Atlanta attorney, and his wife, Eileen Crowley.

Not only had they won the dinner for six, but Gray, who also happens to be the winery's chef, offered his services wherever

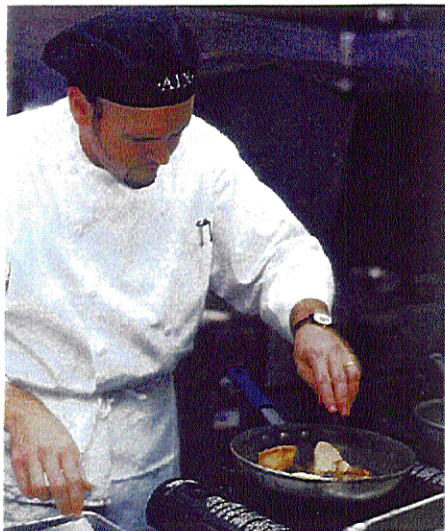
the couple wished. He would cook for them in Atlanta or Napa Valley, where the vineyard is located, or Bistro Aix in Jacksonville. Jacksonville was the winner — which, if you're a University of Georgia fan on the weekend of the big game with the University of Florida, is the place to be.

And so, on one of those just-perfect evenings when the stars are out and a gentle breeze stirs the air, the Bells and their four guests gathered on the patio at Bistro Aix, savoring stone crab claws and sipping Taittinger Champagne. It was a simple precursor to the eight courses that awaited the group.

"This benefits the High Museum, but it is also an opportunity to have some excellent food and enjoy Charlie's wines, which are always very popular at the auction," says the host, Hubert Bell. "Particularly the Cabernet Franc."

Cabernet Franc, used in France as a

Tom Gray (opposite page, top left), executive chef at Bistro Aix, paired wines from the Napa Valley winery Helena View Johnston Vineyards with his own culinary creations for an inventive eight-course dinner for six at the Jacksonville restaurant.



blending partner for Bordeaux wines, has only recently shown up as a varietal, put out by small Napa Valley vineyards such as Helena View, which also offers a stellar Cabernet Sauvignon.

"I took what no one else was doing and ran away with it," says Johnston, whose other job is as a planning specialist for Morgan Stanley in Napa. "The Cabernet Franc was a way for me to do that."

And since Gray met his wife, Sarah Marie, while working at her father's vineyard, he knows a thing or two about Helena View wines. (In fact, Gray's marriage to Sarah Marie might just be his greatest wine and food pairing. Gray, whose training at the Culinary Institute of America led him to jobs at the Wine Spectator's Greystone Restaurant, Dean & DeLuca, and finally, as executive chef of Bistro Aix, wed Sarah Marie, who works for National Distributing Company and does public relations for Helena View, last year.)

"People tend to do a point-counterpoint with wine and food pairing," Gray says. "You counter the sweet with tart, trying to balance the flavors. But really knowing the wine – and I have done everything from picking the grapes on – I like to bring the flavors in the wine to the forefront of the palate."

Gray's inventive dinner coaxed nuances from the wine that left the guests in awe – and they knew what they were talking about. The Bells are both partners in Arcadian Winery, a California Central Coast winery producing Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and an as yet unreleased Petite Syrah. One guest was a professional chef. One was a restaurateur and wine judge. Another admitted, "I'm just here for the wine and the food."

Course after course, Gray, aided by special events chef Clancy Heicher, hit the

mark. Plump seared scallops atop a salad of shaved fennel and red onion, then sweetened with a citrus vanilla sauce, brought out the licorice and vanilla flavors in the 1993 Estate Cabernet Franc.

Another salad elevated the lowly lentil with the addition of smoked bacon, a coarse-grained mustard vinaigrette and a thin slice of Bistro Aix's smoked salmon complemented by the subtle oakiness of the 1995 Cabernet Franc.

As the wines got bigger, Gray matched them with bolder flavors. Seared quail was served over chanterelles and sweet corn, fragrant with sage essence, enhancing the earthiness of the 1994 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. Lightly seared French foie gras, whose richness was cut by the sweetness of huckleberries, brought out the big fruit flavors of the 1995 Estate "Tradition" Cabernet Sauvignon, one of the more outstanding – and rare – wines to be poured that evening.

The intense 1996 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon was served with gnocchi made of butternut squash and potato sauced with

asparagus, oxtail and porcini ragout, a hearty, robust dish.

Two hours later, the group was headed into the sixth and main course – tender braised short ribs served over creamy polenta, and roasted beets and cipolini onions – homey, but elegant. The 1996 Estate "Tradition" Cabernet Sauvignon came out of an exceptional vintage year, Johnston says, but in keeping with the winery's small production, it was limited to 180 cases. The diners considered themselves lucky.

Dessert almost seemed like gilding the lily, but pastry chef Tiffany Bernasek rose to the occasion with her Sinfully Chocolate Cake. No one demurred from the decadence of the cake, warm with a velvet chocolate sauce, that opened to reveal a sweet Italian cherry at its center. The chocolate and cherry flavors echoed in the 1997 Estate Reserve Cabernet Franc.

And was the dinner worth it?

"Absolutely," the guests said in chorus, noting that they'd be happy to come back to Jacksonville – and Bistro Aix – for dinner anytime. ☞



**Sinfully Chocolate
Cake**