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What's creme de cassis and why should I use it?

BY DAVID HAMMOND November 27, 2012 8:15AM

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Right out of graduate school, I was invited to a lunchtime interview for a college teaching position. A twenty-something, still very green, I wanted to impress my interviewer by ordering a sophisticated beverage. I chose kir, the elegantly simple aperitif of creme de cassis and white wine. This impress-your-potential-employer stratagem seemed to have worked: I got the job.

Creme de cassis is a black currant liqueur, and it's required in kir, though some unscrupulous mixologists may substitute less authentic alternatives. According to Lance Mayhew at mylifeontherocks.com, "Many times with kir, the bartender serves you not creme de cassis but Chambord," which also is a deep red liquor, though made of raspberries.

Black currants are less sweet and more acidic than raspberries, with wine-grape astringency, making them a good match for lush meats, such as foie gras and fatty pork.

Currants also are good for you, with more vitamin C than oranges plus a hefty punch of polyphenols, which are believed to have anti-aging properties.

On a recent visit to Dijon, in France's Burgundy region, Mayhew and I sat down with Jean Battault, whose family owns Gabriel Boudier, a maker of spirits since 1874.

A big, gregarious man, Battault explained that aperitifs like creme de cassis are excellent for "opening stomach muscles and starting secretions" before a big meal.

He prepared for us glasses of kir with three-quarters "neutral white wine" and one-quarter creme de cassis.

As long as it's of sufficiently high-quality, creme de cassis is drinkable all by itself, with a deep fruity flavor that can be enjoyed either before or after dinner.

I deploy creme de cassis instead of sweet vermouth in Manhattans, and I recently came up with a recipe for an uncomplicated sauce that highlights the rich currant flavor.

To ½ cup creme de cassis, add ¼ cup dried mirabelles — small yellow plums from Nancy, France (you also could use dried black currants, available at Whole Foods, or even dried cranberries).

After gently heating this mixture in a ceramic pan, add 1 tablespoon of butter-browned shallots and 1 teaspoon of fresh Dijon mustard, all reduced to a light sauce.

This simple sauce perked up our pan-fried pork steak, conferring continental flair on even this humble hunk of meat.

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