

MARCH 20, 2024

How the New York Times wine critic became a Charlotte regular

Mimosa Grill hosts Eric Asimov for an annual wine dinner

by Jacqueline Pennington



Chefs Kaley Laird and Scott Wallen paired each course for the dinner at Mimosa Grill. Jacqueline Pennington/UP

Earlier this month, the sixth annual Wine School Dinner with the *New York Times* Chief Wine Critic, Eric Asimov, took place at Mimosa Grill. It's not every day that someone with Asimov's type of influence in the wine world stops by Charlotte for a dinner where he shares a table and chats with local wine lovers.

In 2014, Asimov started a monthly column in the *Times* called "Wine School," where readers were invited to drink and discuss wines hand-picked by Asimov himself. Tom Sasser, owner of Burke Hospitality Group, and several wine loving friends decided they

would meet monthly to partake in Asimov's "Wine School". Asimov would include discussion points and questions about the wines and the group would always take their notes and answers and leave them in the comments section of the article. Sasser and his group did this for all but one of the 100 columns that Asimov wrote and Asimov would sometimes quote the group in a follow up article.

In 2017, the group reached out to Asimov when they decided to plan a wine dinner inspired by the wines in his monthly columns. Unexpectedly, Asimov responded noting he would be nearby for another event in the coming months and offered to stop in Charlotte for the dinner. That dinner in particular was called "Perfect Pairings" where Sasser, as owner of restaurants like Harper's and Mimosa Grill, coordinated the chefs in his restaurants to create dishes that matched some of the wines from Asimov's columns. The dinner was a success and, with the exception of the pandemic, has taken place every year since.

This year in particular, the Wine School Dinner was inspired by "The New Wave in Spain" and showcased wines that are being made by young Spanish winemakers who have taken over from those who were making wine before them. These winemakers are taking risks, producing exceptional wine, and catching the eye of big-time wine critics, like Asimov. The menu was specially curated with a reception followed by four seated courses where chefs Kaley Laird of Mimosa Grill and Scott Wallen of Taco Molino created beautifully executed dishes that highlighted and complimented the flavors of each wine.



Charred octopus was one of the courses paired with Spanish wines. Jacqueline Pennington/UP

All but one of the wines came from the well-known and respected Charlotte-based wine importer, Eric Solomon. Solomon also attended the dinner and spoke briefly to the selection of wines and why they were so special. One stunning wine he showcased was an Albariño from 2014. Albariño is typically a grape that is thought to be enjoyable only when consumed young or shortly after it's been produced. This example showed the grape's surprising capability to age for ten years and develop concentrated flavors that paired perfectly with Chef Laird's scallop crudo.

As the dinner wrapped up, the chefs came out to mingle and people began to move between tables to chat with their fellow wine and food lovers. The room was full of almost empty wine glasses and buzzing with conversation, spurred by the *New York Times* wine critic who took a chance on Charlotte — and the group of friends who took a chance asking him to come here.