

**Interview: Chef Thomas Schmidt, John Ash & Co. Restaurant**  
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Northern California Wine Country is one of the Bay Area's biggest perks — just a stone's throw from San Francisco lies a dream-like agricultural community, where some of the best wines in the world are produced. As Napa and Sonoma counties have grown in stature over the years, the region's food culture has steadily kept pace, making the plethora of restaurants and their reigning chefs true Bay Area foodie royalty. The lasting power of these restaurants is evidence of their continued appeal, too — take John Ash & Co. Restaurant in Santa Rosa, which celebrated its 35th anniversary this summer. Here, we talk to Executive Chef Thomas Schmidt about the defining characteristics of Wine Country cuisine, his favorite dishes during harvest time, and the future of food in the region.

**What do you think is particularly special about food culture in Sonoma's Wine Country? How is it unique from the rest of Northern California?** Sonoma Wine Country is a chef's dream! There is a plethora of fresh, local vegetables, dairy farms, meats and seafood to choose from to create memorable dishes. The fact that we are in the middle of an agricultural community gives me daily inspiration to cook using what we grow here and not having to get products from all over the state or country.

**How does this drive your menu stylistically?** Seasonality of local fruits, vegetables and using local proteins. Knowing the farmers who grow the food we cook with. Our cuisine at John Ash & Co. incorporates locally grown products including estate grown vegetables, artisan cheese, locally sourced seafood and meats and is designed to pair well with the various Sonoma County grape varieties.

**What kind of experience do you hope diners will have?** We strive to create a memorable dining experience for all our guests, including wine and cocktail selections, and a variety of beautifully crafted dishes. Having the guest see how important food and wine pairing is. We love to see their delight the moment they experience how well certain foods really pair with wines.

**How important is wine pairing to your menu? Do you create dishes with specific varietals in mind?** Wine is a natural partner to all of our dishes. We design plates to pair with the different varieties grown in this region. We host many winemaker dinners which gives me great insight into the different nuances from many different local wines and it gives me the chance to play and pair them with all different types of food.

**As we approach a transitional time seasonally (and harvest time in Sonoma), how will your menu change? Any dishes and/or wines that you're particularly excited about?** We change our menu with each season. The end of summer and beginning of fall is an especially exciting time of year, because I love the fall produce we grow in our garden. Some favorites are our Estate Figs baked with Redwood Hill Farm chèvre served with mixed baby greens, paired with Ferrari-Carano Fumé Blanc; and oven-roasted estate heirloom tomatoes with pan seared Pacific halibut finished with estate olive oil, paired with Balletto Chardonnay.

**How do you think "wine country cuisine" has changed over the past 7-10 years? What direction do you think it will go in next?** Much more focus on "Farm-to-table" (which we at John Ash & Co have been doing since the beginning). Being more sustainable. Making house cured meats from local farm animals. More casual dining with small plates that pair well with Sonoma County wines and now craft beers.

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