

Jennifer Mitchell is back!

Not that sommelier Jennifer Mitchell, who came to Tallinn from California, ever left. And in 2023, the sommelier, who in 2007 received the Wine Spectator award at the Three Sisters Hotel, fulfilled one of her lifelong dreams: she opened her own restaurant, Vixen Steakhouse.

“I grew up in a home where food was not emphasized. My mother was not a cook and didn’t make anything special. She made only so-called white foods, with no colors or spices. Food was not a source of pleasure. That’s why it was weird when I ended up working in a restaurant. And it turned out that I even had talent. And I discovered that I liked good food. Who would have known?” Mitchell explains of her origins.

At Allreds restaurant in Telluride, Colorado, the future sommelier got her first introduction to wine when she started tasting wines after work with the restaurant’s wine connoisseur. Mitchell developed an interest in wines, which led to her decision to study and become an internationally certified sommelier.

Now, after opening her first restaurant, on Lai street in Tallinn, the accomplished sommelier has returned to the kitchen. She had planned to open a restaurant only after retirement—for example, somewhere on a Greek island as a pastime in her old age. But with the successful Vixen Vinoteek already operating around the corner, Mitchell decided to take a risk.

The beginning: Three Sisters Hotel

Mitchell landed in eastern Europe in the 1990s, in St. Petersburg. From there, she rather accidentally came to Tallinn. She fell in love with the old city, looked for a place to live and hitched her future to Estonia. Mitchell’s name came to the wider public in 2007, when one of the world’s leading wine magazines, Wine Spectator, bestowed its famous award upon the wine list of the Three Sisters Hotel, created under her leadership. To this day, there are only a few thousand of the accolades in the world. At that time, it was the first in the entire Baltic region including Finland.

The sommelier mentions that the wine list she created at Three Sisters comprised classical selections which made it strong. “In some places it would be necessary to tinker, update some vintages and make additions, but the backbone of the wine list was solid. I was happy that it turned out to stand the test of time.”

Mitchell recalls how she began offering wine-and-food-pairing workshops at the hotel and how, under the eyes of a sommelier, people began to understand how wine and food can interact. The success of these events inspired her to continue on that path because she understood how to raise awareness of her guests’ taste buds.

After having a child here in 2007, Mitchell spent a few years in her native California, followed by a year traveling the globe. On her return to Tallinn, she re-entered the wine business as an importer. She brought to Estonia wines generally not available in this region, such as from small regions in Germany (Franken, Nahe) and France (Savoie) and also from California.

Next step: Vixen Vinoteek

The next step was establishing her own wine bar, which Mitchell took over from her former Three Sisters colleague Kristjan Päeske. Mitchell changed the name, reorchestrated the wine list and opened the place anew, according to her own taste and sense of direction.

Vixen Vinoteek began by specializing in wines by the glass. “The idea was to offer people the widest possible range of taste experiences and the opportunity to simply enjoy wine,” says Mitchell. If you add to that the vast selection of bottles, featuring sought-after vintages from around the world, you can immerse yourself in Vixen’s bounty for days.

Many of the wines at the vinoteek are imported directly from the sommelier’s home state. It means that the wines are special, not available anywhere else outside their place of origin, and Mitchell knows them thoroughly. But she keeps exploring. Mitchell is currently awaiting her first order from the country of Georgia, a mix of exciting labels which she assembled after a visit there last year.

“Last October I spent a few weeks traveling in Georgia, and I encountered some incredible wines. I developed a love for the local qvevri wines, and I began to better understand the old ways of making wines. My opinion about natural wines, especially orange wines, changed a great deal. I have never appreciated them, but the people there educated me and their wines captivated me,” says the sommelier.

Indeed, the shelves of Vixen Vinoteek boast wines from Mitchell’s own country as well as from many other interesting wine regions. At the moment, for example, the sommelier has turned her attention to Switzerland and is eager to expose Estonians to the renowned Chasselas white wine.

Mitchell mentions that in the beginning, she curated the entire Vixen inventory. But now Madis Naarits, the vinoteek’s head sommelier, is by her side and plays a major role in finding new wines and setting the list.

And then – Vixen Steakhouse

“I had two concepts for a restaurant. A bistro crossed my mind, but then I decided to stick to things I know better. In America, a steakhouse is a classic place to eat, with great service and meat that melts in your mouth. Most important, I grew up in the culture of steakhouses. And I didn’t think that there was a steakhouse in Tallinn quite like Vixen,” explains Mitchell.

Like the vinoteek, the steakhouse reflects Mitchell’s personal style. She designed the interior, created the menu and set the wine list. She also assembled an international kitchen staff who work as a happy team under their inspirational leader.

For our tasting, the sommelier—or rather, chef, at least some of the time—sets the table with lobster-shrimp ceviche and lightly grilled Wagyu beef tataki. With the ceviche she serves a lively rosé wine from Austria, made from Merlot. Mitchell says she likes how the wine’s acidity softens the food while retaining the grape’s fruitiness.

“We have a lot of good white wines to choose from, but I like to think outside the box when it comes to ceviche. I like pink wines even in winter. Since lobster is also slightly sweet, the wine also needs the lushness that Merlot can offer,” the chef-sommelier explains. “I always like to pour generously and openly, to give people a taste of different wines. For the Wagyu tataki, Mitchell pours a premier cru Chassagne-Montrachet, which matches the juiciness of the meat and stands up to its slightly spicy ponzu sauce.

“We don’t change our menu as much as some restaurants in our league, but we add new ideas and flavors when it feels right. The basics, like high-quality meat with enticing side dishes will always be our signature,” says Mitchell.

Both dishes I tasted on this occasion were divine. The menu as a whole is perfect for any occasion. Delightful flavors, a charming hostess and the best wines in the world. What more could you ask for?

NB! About once a month, Vixen Vinoteek hosts a brunch called “Bloody Mary Sunday,” where you can enjoy omelets made-to-order (by Mitchell herself), salads, waffles and mix-your-own Bloody Mary cocktails from house-made vodkas. Don’t miss it!