

Something Different

Written by Terry Connor
Wednesday, 12 October 2011 10:05

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I am going to take a “one time” detour from our regular format and still remain consistent with our general theme of Drinking Globally. Included in the most recent issue of The Wine Spectator is the list of restaurants that are noted as having the world’s best wine lists.

Believe me when I say that this is a BIG DEAL. When the awards are presented; it is strictly Black Tie with all the trimmings. Since last February, when I started this column, I have made mention of nine of the countries that are highlighted in this issue of The Wine Spectator. With this in mind I thought it might be interesting to find out what goes into constructing a wine list for a restaurant.

A good starting point is the owner and his staff putting their respective heads together and coming up with answers to questions like: What kind of restaurant is this? What kind of food do we serve and what kind of wine will be a good accompaniment to our cuisine? What is our price point? How much space can we allow for inventory? What type of customer can we expect and will they range from easy to please to finicky? (This is a yes!) Are we going to serve wine by the glass?

These questions, and many others connected with the wine selection process, seem like common sense. They *are* common sense however, the answers to these questions are as important as any others. It is an exercise that must be completed. There is, after all, an opportunity here; to take the wine drinker in many directions to discover what is new and exciting, or to have the guest of the restaurant enjoy his or her regular vintage.

Here in the Lowcountry we have hundreds of restaurants that make wine available to their guests. In most cases, the restaurants that serve wine showcase a well thought-out wine list. Indeed there are no less than 24 restaurants, from Charleston to Savannah, that have received awards from The Wine Spectator. These awards are not given because the owner of the restaurant has 200,000 bottles of wine in his cellar. Rather, it is because his wine list reflects a balance of reds, whites, and sparkling; and somewhere on that list his guests will find a wine that is a true companion to their meal.

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Let's sample two scenarios to enhance the concept of balance. The first would be a restaurant located in Napa Valley, California. The restaurant probably has wine available for its guests. Due to its location, the wine that is available would be heavy in California choices (Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, etc.) with choices from anywhere else the owner chooses to balance out his wine list. In contrast to this, a restaurant located in the Lowcountry is not anywhere near a wine growing area. Therefore, the restaurateur in the Lowcountry has the more difficult task of trying to please a customer base that consists of permanent residents, students, tourists, transient residents, and many others (including us Red Sox Fans in a state of Mourning). The more variation in customer types, the more variation in wine types. As the saying goes, "It ain't easy."

Allow me to add a few words about wine "by the glass." In my opinion, this is a win-win situation. The restaurant receives a good profit from the serving and the customer receives just the amount of wine that he/she wants. A casual sipper or a single glass customer would probably look for a selection of a light, medium, or heavy red or white, or maybe a Prosecco.

Construction of a wine list involves careful consideration of inventory. It carries with it a boatload of responsibility. What to put into inventory and how much? Here is where restaurant owner and supplier work together. What is available? What is the price point? I will TASTE each wine before I put any wine into inventory.

With all that goes into making a wine list, I am able to safely say that it takes years of practice for a beverage manager to be anywhere near satisfied with his wine list. Why? Because every year there are new wines, new wineries, new winemakers at the wineries, and the list goes on and on.

WINESPEAK. As a guest in a restaurant, never be intimidated by a wine list. You are in a restaurant because you want to be there. The owner would love to sell you a bottle of wine. If the wine list is a bit much to deal with, ask your waiter or **sommelier** for some assistance. That is what they are there for. Believe it when I say that sommeliers enjoy helping people. Another twist that I try quite often is to show up at the restaurant very early and go to the bar, order a drink, and ask to see the wine list. Doing this allows you time to browse at your own pace.

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Next stop in our journey is Chile.

Cheers

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