

Food & Drink

A la carte and à la carafe

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Wine



Since your restaurant critic is straying into my territory this week by writing about sommeliers, I thought I would venture into his territory to consider restaurant wine lists and the changing relationship between restaurants and wine.

One development is that outside France red bordeaux has virtually disappeared from the lists of all but the most classic establishments with their own long-cherished cellars. It's easy to see why restaurant owners are wary of serious bordeaux that has to be matured for years before it's ready to drink – but more difficult to see why bargains in the lower ranks are ignored, especially since red bordeaux is, quintessentially, a wine to be drunk with food. Perhaps it is partly because it can be difficult to identify the stars in the vast firmament of lesser bordeaux, and also because the wine companies that specialise in supplying restaurants have given up on the *hauteur* associated with France's biggest fine wine region.

In the UK at least there has, until recently, been a sharp divide between the rest of the wine trade and the companies prepared to jump through the hoops associated with supplying restaurants, including daily deliveries and credit lines as long as the finish on a Cheval Blanc 1947. But now that the high street chains have disappeared and it has become almost impossible to make money selling to supermarkets, British wine merchants are turning towards bars, gastropubs and restaurants for new opportunities.

However, there is such a well-established nucleus of specialists in supplying what is known as the "on-trade" that I find I often take a look at a wine list and can see immediately whether the dominant supplier is, for example, Bibendum (tell-tale wines include La Serre, d'Arenberg), Liberty (Kim Crawford, Fontodi) or Caves de Pyrène (offbeat names from French byways such

as Domaine des Roches Neuves).

The advance in the UK of so-called natural wine, with minimal chemical additions, has been accelerated by the close relationships between Caves de Pyrène, their chief British promulgator, and individual sommeliers. As ex-Oddbins wine buyer Steve Daniel, who now buys for restaurant supplier Novum, points out, selling wine to restaurants is quite different from selling wine to any other sort of trade customer. Price and quality, delivery and payment terms all pale into insignificance beside personal relationships. "In restaurants it's all about who you know," he insists.

I always know when wine-trade tastings are aimed at sommeliers because they are (a) timed for immediately before or after lunch service and (b) full of twentysomething foreigners who taste in packs like thirsty, loquacious wolves. It takes some confidence to spend your boss's money on a commodity as arcane as wine, so it can be reassuring to get other people's opinions. And it is hugely important to wine sellers aiming at the restaurant trade to target people with access to the purse strings, and to convince them that only you know the way, the truth and the light as far as wine is concerned.

As a restaurant customer who understands that the profits generated by the bottles I order are subsidising the meals of teetotalers (margins are lower on food than drink), I am delighted when I see evidence that a wine list has been supplied by a variety of merchants. It suggests to me that some thought has gone into assembling the range.

And I am not necessarily impressed by very long wine lists. They can take an age to wade through. I'd rather have two or three well-chosen vintages or producers of a particular wine than an exhaustive display of them all. An alternative is to have the list available online for pre-emptive study – although

creativity and rigour are needed to keep the list up to date.

The day of the annually printed wine list is surely over. There are few more dated sights in a restaurant than a printed wine list with manual amendments.

The joy of daily changing menus and print on demand is that it can be easy to keep wine lists *au courant* with the latest stock depletions. The iPad is making its presence felt as an adjunct to selling wine in restaurants, particularly in Asia and the US. Early adopters are not necessarily brilliant executioners. European exceptions include Colm McCan at Ballymaloe in Ireland's County Cork and the temple to connoisseurship, Monvínic in Barcelona.

Another development is the increase in wines available by the glass and – as at Arbutus, Wild Honey and Les Deux Salons in London – 25cl carafe. US restaurateurs have long offered this sort of option and their British counterparts are finally catching up.

I am rather worried about the increasing tendency in British bars to treat 17.5cl as a standard glassful. It contains roughly twice as much alcohol as the standard unit that the medical profession is always berating us about. So I am delighted to learn that the British government is set to allow measures smaller than the old standard wine glass measure, 12.5cl, to be sold legally (anything smaller currently attracts weights and measures objections). This also opens the doors to the possibility of offering wine flights, for example.

There are many ways to present an array of wines on a restaurant list. But for most diners, less fixated by wine than me, I suspect that the most sensible way is to list by colour and then upwards by price. Most people know far more about how much they want to spend than about where each wine comes from.

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