

Making The A-List

Putting Together The Right Wine Menu Can Be Critical To Guest Satisfaction



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As important as a creative food menu is to a resort and hotel restaurant, a creative wine list is equally as important. A great wine list often can be the “make or break” difference in a dining experience, as well as a way to create a loyal guest following for dinners, happy hour and special occasions.

“Wine is a major part of any dining experience,” said Robert Weil, director of food and beverage at The Resort at Longboat Key Club in Sarasota, FL. “When your guests are receiving that one-of-a-kind experience that only the synergy between food and wine can provide, they will seek it out time and time again.”

“The wine list, said Federico Galligani, general manager at Castello di Casole --Timbers Resort in Casole d'Elsa SI, Italy, “is often a direct reflection of the restaurant’s overall quality and reaffirms guests’ thoughts on whether they chose the right place to dine.

“A good wine list demonstrates the investment by the restaurant and the overall knowledge of its staff. In economic terms, a good wine list would present well-known wines at fair prices, while ‘must have’ wines would have reasonable margins. Special undiscovered labels would generate high profits because of their superb quality and ‘wow’ effect.”

Here's how top sommeliers and restaurant executives go about creating that "wow" effect. "A lot of it has to do with storage," said Virginia Philip, Master Sommelier at The Breakers Palm Beach. "What a restaurant can capably store in terms of refrigeration, temperature control and shelving."

Beyond those things, a wine list has to reflect the theme or culture of that specific restaurant. "First and foremost, a wine list should complement the food," said Josh Loving Aaronson, general manager/sommelier at Capa Steakhouse at Four Seasons Orlando. "As a Spanish-style steakhouse, we pride ourselves on diverse selections from Spain to complement our chef's creative Spanish dishes, while both well-known and hard-to-find American cult wines highlight our prime beef."

In addition to wines that complement the food, Aaronson said the wine list should be creative enough to allow sommeliers the opportunity to guide diners to places they might not necessarily go.

"Pinot Noir is rarely associated with beef, but having a stylistically diverse offering of pinots allows our team to suggest wines that complement the food and educate the guest," Aaronson said.

At Azul, the signature fine-dining restaurant at The Mandarin Oriental Miami, Wine Director Dwayne Savoie has a list of more than 600 wines from around the world.

"From there we searched to find the best offerings from each major wine producing region, while at the same time focusing on small, family owned producers," said Savoie. "Our program buys many items on a weekly basis. Some items are easier to find and sell at a rapid pace, but others are allocated items that are only released once a year and could be limited to as little as three bottles.

"We also do 'buy in' on good vintages in Burgundy, Bordeaux and Italy. This long-term buying plan allows us to have more depth in the noteworthy vintages. For example, we could spend up to \$10,000 on a good Bordeaux or Burgundy vintage to secure the wines and add them to list at a later date when they are ready to drink."

The St. Regis Bal Harbour (FL) also has approximately 600 wines in its famed Wine Vault. "Our philosophy when we select the wine is that 'it's all about the juice in the bottle,'" said Nino Milenkovski, sommelier at the resort's J&G Grill. "What that means is that we don't go by points alone. We are not afraid to stock wines that are unrated by wine critics if they are popular with our clientele and continue to sell well at the restaurant.

"Since Miami has a very international clientele, we strongly believe that having an international wine selection will help us attract every type of taste and pallet from around the world, which in turn drives more business to the restaurant. We carry wines from countries that most people don't even associate with wine, like Macedonia, Lebanon, Slovenia, Austria, Greece and Israel," he added.

For Wesley Kurz, sommelier at the Fairmont Grand Del Mar in San Diego, selecting wine is part instinct and part collaboration.

“Although a sommelier might initially have a particular selection in mind, he or she should also listen to both guests and staff alike to determine what has moved, what has not and what resonates,” Kurz said. “Sommeliers might wish to test wines with pre-launch tasting experiences before committing a new wine to the list or even ask directly for guest suggestions and feedback.

“With service at the heart of what we do, we actively listen and get to know our guests on a personal, individualized level. When we learn that a guest favors a particular wine, we are sure to have it available prior to his or her next arrival,” he added.

It is difficult to say, according to Kurz, exactly how many wines should be put on any particular list. “The wine list should grow organically with wines being added progressively as more knowledge and understanding of guests’ preferences is acquired,” said Kurz. “Evolving the wine list in this manner also helps to keep guests interested and coming back for a unique experience each time. Rather than quantifying a certain number, what is more important in building a wine list is offering a diverse selection of known, new and experimental wines.

“For example, if a guest sees a wine that he or she knows and enjoys, a well-trained server or sommelier can confidently suggest something new that is comparable or something entirely out-of-the-box. Often, this makes for an even more memorable experience,” he added.

While new and different each are good, what are some “must haves” on every great wine list? “Sauvignon Blanc is a ‘must’ because people are drinking more of it,” Philip said. “And if you’re not going to do New Zealand or California, then generally the option is French or Italian.”

The most desirable varietals in any restaurant, said Justin Thompson, senior F&B manager at The Sebastian – Vail – A Timbers Resort, are pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon, malbec, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, prosecco and champagne.

“However, as Leonora (The Sebastian's signature restaurant) is a tapas restaurant, it’s necessary to include popular Spanish varietals as well. A few personal favorites include Tinto Pesquera and Vall Llach from Spain, Tikal and Lunta Malbec from Argentina, Merry Edwards and Peter Michael from Oregon and California, respectfully. I’m also a huge fan of starting off any meal with a glass of grower champagne--Pierre Peters is a favorite.”

On the Left Coast, Kurz said name brands such as Robert Mondavi, Silver Oak and Nickel & Nickel are on his “must have” list.

“With our location in Southern California, flagships from Napa Valley and Sonoma are staples to our particular menu,” at Addison, the resort’s signature restaurant. “However, we are adding wines from Mexico’s burgeoning Baja wine region, which is also nearby.”

All of this brings us to perhaps the most important aspect of creating a great wine list – cost. That is, the cost of buying product and the list price (bottle and by the glass) on the menu.

“We tell our vendors that we don’t want to see any wines under \$12,” said Philip. “From there we’ll go up to \$40 or \$50 per glass at our outlets.”

Most wine programs, Savoie said, will have budget guidelines that determine what dollar amount of wine inventory will be necessary to maintain the list based on business levels and the aforementioned wine list philosophy.

“Through this process we can determine how much of each wine we should inventory,” he said. “Some wines we may carry as little as three bottles, but others that are less expensive we could stock 12 bottles or more.”

“If you have a menu that is very value based, you want a wine list that reflects that for the most part,” said Weil. “However, this does not mean stepping away from quality in any way. In choosing a number of wines, you have to have a little something for everyone -- whether it be in style and price point. The key is balance with a list that you can manage and move product.”