

The art of wine at the Tate

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House wines used to be the most disappointing aspect of any visit to any restaurant. Often thin and acidic, a house wine's only saving grace – at least until the following morning – was that it was inexpensive.

The good news today is that not only is the overall quality of most wine lists vastly superior to what it used to be even a decade ago but also that the simple choice of either one house red or one house white has virtually disappeared. Instead, many restaurateurs have introduced a section at the front of their wine list called House or Sommelier's Selection which allows them to offer three or four different wines, both red and white, of varying styles and origin by the glass.

The main reasons for this change are increased knowledge on the part of the consumer and decreasing demand for whole bottles, particularly at lunchtime. Wine sales critically underpin any restaurant's profitability, as Nigel Platts- Martin of The Square once explained to me when he said that 'wine drinkers effectively subsidise the non- wine drinkers'. Restaurateurs have realised that by offering a more easily accessible, wider choice of wine by the glass to their customers they can offset this trend. Many more are now also, admirably, copying the example set by Will Smith, initially at Arbutus off Soho Square, of offering all their wines by the 250cl carafe, an approach he is the first to confess he borrowed from Lupa in New York.

But the choice of the least expensive wine is still crucial for any restaurant because it is so often the impulse choice of many customers who may have come in to eat but are not that inclined to drink even a glass. And for anyone now planning an early evening reception or a large dinner this may have to be the wine of choice to ensure that the budget is not exceeded.

To discover more about the process of buying inexpensive wine, I sat down opposite Hamish Anderson, the wine buyer for Tate Restaurants, one afternoon recently on the seventh floor café at Tate Modern. The cafes and restaurants for which he is responsible include not just that in this old turbine hall but also Tate Britain in London; Tate St Ives in Cornwall; their outpost at The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge; and The Bluecoat, which they have recently opened in Liverpool.

Over the past decade, Anderson, 35, has become a highly influential wine buyer despite, as he put it, 'leaving Newcastle University with no idea of what I was going to do.' He trained as a sommelier at Bibendum restaurant and then joined Tate in 1997 just as it was beginning its expansion into Tate Modern. Today, as buyer of their wines, coffee, teas and soft drinks he is responsible for 40% of the company's annual turnover of £13.4 million, making an overall contribution of £1.74 million to the Tate's finances.

I also chose Anderson because these restaurants and cafés are very diverse. The interior of Tate Britain, where I have eaten well twice recently despite a lumpy rice pudding at the end of the second meal, boasts a Rex Whistler mural that makes it one of the capital's most attractive dining rooms. Forty per cent of visitors to Tate Modern are tourists from overseas while the majority of his customers at St Ives are British holidaymakers. The success of The Bluecoat will depend almost entirely on attracting those who work and live around Liverpool. How and where do you find inexpensive wines to satisfy such diverse customers?

Anderson's initial response was perhaps predictable. "I don't like the phrase house wines because I still believe it has negative connotations. We train our staff to respond to any such request to say that we have a range by the glass and then suggest the most appropriate for what they are going to eat. Or 'of the five we have by the glass, this is the one which I tasted most recently and most enjoyed'."

"But for Tate Modern, in particular, our least expensive wines, for which we charge £3 a glass or £13.50 a bottle in the café, have both come from Spain for the past few years. The white is from Rueda and the red is from Alicante although I am going to switch suppliers soon and buy the red from Navarra. I buy 2,000 cases of the house white a year and 800 cases of our house red." The big discrepancy in quantity is because here, as in most galleries and museums, there is a white- wine only rule for receptions to minimise possible stains and damage."

Diplomacy presumably plays a small part in the choice of Spain as the source of his two most inexpensive wines because Tate Modern's Director, Vicente Todolí, whom Anderson described as 'mad about food and wine', is Spanish. But there are strong quality and commercial reasons, too.

"Although I ship wine directly from South Africa and New Zealand, Europe has to be the source of these wines because of the quantities involved. We need to be able to ship quickly and regularly to minimise our stock holding. But over the past few years I think Spanish wine producers have been far more proactive in offering me the kinds of wine I'm looking for."

For his inexpensive white wine Anderson is looking for something that is fresh, fruity and instantly appealing while the red has to have soft tannins, obvious fruit and no residual sugar - slight sweetness is often the characteristic Anderson finds a fault in many inexpensive reds. "What I'm also looking for even at this price point is some expression of the individual wine producing region and Spain scores here because it has managed to hang on to many of its indigenous grape varieties. That's not the case with the co- ops in the south of France, and while southern Italy produces some interesting reds it's too hot for crisp, fresh whites."

But the biggest difference in why these and other inexpensive wines taste better than in the past has been the introduction of screwcaps rather than corks. "There's no doubt that this change allows my bar staff to pour and serve the wines in perfect condition and it makes the whole wine service so much more relaxed for the customer in cafés such as ours where we don't employ dedicated sommeliers. And when we are holding an event screwcaps are even more useful."

Anderson's insistence on screwcap for his white wines involved him and his producer eventually changing the wine producing regulations of the Rueda region but, like so many wine buyers, and chefs, he's currently facing another big challenge, the weakness of the pound against the euro.

"The price of our least expensive wines hasn't gone up for three years but the stronger euro and the increased duty in the last Budget equate to an increased cost of 40p per bottle. On top of that the 2007 vintage in Europe wasn't prolific while transport and bottle costs are up, too."

Anderson's response to this will be a new wine list on which the wines by the glass will be reduced from 175ml to an arguably healthier 125ml with more by the carafe at 250ml, which he hopes will keep the initial prices at £3 per glass. "That's a crucial price point," he explained, "and I'm going to have to buy well to keep it there."

Tate Restaurants www.tate.org.uk