

## From the sommelier's mouth

22 Apr 2006 by JR

Sommeliers, or wine waiters, are the dark horses of the restaurant world. They can contribute just as much to the enjoyment of any meal as chefs, their far better known colleagues, and can, quite easily and unintentionally, ruin what promises to be a highly enjoyable evening.

An unsuitable wine recommendation or perhaps a confrontation, however minor, over whether a wine is corked or not, can prove uncomfortable, unforgettable and a justifiable reason for never returning. And as wine prices rise, a sommelier plays an increasingly large role in not just the final bill but also the restaurant's financial prosperity.

Sommeliers also see us, their customers, at our most vulnerable. Choosing wines for friends with differing tastes who have therefore ordered very different food can be tricky and this is often something the host wants to do quickly to get back to the conversation. And all this takes place in the glare of the restaurant – sommeliers, unlike chefs, do not have the liberty of arguing behind the kitchen's swing door.

To learn more about this world, and in particular whether different nationalities order their wine differently, I met up at Galvin restaurant with Benoit Allauzen, the 33 year old head sommelier at The Greenhouse in Mayfair, one Saturday lunchtime – one of his few shifts off in his more than 60 hour week.

Allauzen has the international perspective I thought would prove instructive, having grown up in Avignon before working in California and subsequently in several busy restaurants in the UK. He is currently responsible for one of the most extensive wine lists in the country with 2,300 different bins (with a stock value close to £1 million) from which, with the assistance of three other sommeliers, he generates monthly wine sales of around £60,000.

Allauzen began to explain his customers' distinctive characteristics by referring to his three years in San Francisco, stressing quite how crucial they had been in his appreciation of service. "Americans are complicated to deal with because they are so used to choice. If you go to a table of five Americans for their coffee order you will come back with five very different requests. And it is the same with the menu. Americans are far more likely to order a dish without one particular ingredient or to ask for another to be substituted than we are in Europe. So I had to learn to be flexible. And their tipping system propels you to give the best service you can because you will be rewarded so promptly. When you cash out at the end of the evening you will share in what has been earned and you won't have to wait until the end of the month to get paid."

But London, he had come to realise, is the city to be in if you want to be a sommelier. "I try to go to two to three tastings a week and they cover the whole spectrum from bad to fantastic but what distinguishes the Anglo-Saxon approach to wine, here and in the US as opposed to France, is it is so much more objective. At tastings here the approach is to examine, analyse and then evaluate the wine and as a result I've learnt so much. The only thing that's missing here are the vineyards, sadly," Allauzen added with a smile.

To encourage him to be less discreet I suggested we order and after he had chosen steak tartare followed by tuna I ordered two very different dishes, matjes herring with a potato salad and an unctuous tete de veau and handed him Galvin's wine list to choose something sympathetic to four such diverse dishes. "It's a well-priced list," he commented admiringly, before choosing a 2003 Sancerre Rouge from Henri Bourgeois. "It's from the hot vintage so it will be powerful enough to stand up to what we have ordered." And he was proved right.

As he thought back over his seven years as a sommelier, Allauzen continued, "I don't think that a person's nationality plays that important a part in how they choose wine, it's more to do with their social class. A wealthy American will share the same approach as a wealthy Frenchman, for example, although I hope not many will behave like the table of wealthy Hong Kong Chinese we had in recently who were clicking their fingers at all the staff. But wine appreciation is aspirational and the wines people choose says a lot about them and how they want to be seen. Do they want, for example, the security of the Old World, Bordeaux and Burgundy, or do they want to be seen as more adventurous with a wine, equally expensive, but from California or Italy?"

"And the other big distinction when it comes to choosing wine is of course whether the occasion is corporate and it's the company that is paying ultimately or private and the host is paying himself. And it's quite easy to spot which is which as a customer opens the wine list and goes through it. But very recently we had an interesting challenge. A table of five French brokers came in and they didn't even bother to open the wine list, all they said to me was 'We want to drink well.' The challenge was I didn't know quite how well. In the end I got it right and they drank very well, Trimbach's Clos St Hune 1990; La Petite Siberie from the Languedoc; Asteroid from Didier Dageanau; a 1985 Haut Brion blanc; a 1990 Pommard and a 1991 Cote-Rotie La Landonne from Guigal with a bottle of 1983 Yquem at the end. Their bill came to £5,000, of which the wine was £4,400."

As Allauzen began to enjoy his lunch more general observations started to emerge "When I first came to London I was surprised at how much the English drank. If a couple came in they would have a gin and tonic to start, a good bottle of wine and then a digestif. They're good drinkers the English but not as good as the Irish. The French are good too and so are the Germans if it is a corporate occasion, the Spanish less so and we haven't had too much success so far with Australian or New Zealand customers. Arab customers fall into two distinct camps. They either drink orange juice throughout the meal or order something highly sought after straight away like Margaux or Latour 1982. And although we now get quite a number of Russian customers I think that those who were here a few years ago were bigger spenders."

Before Allauzen finished his tarte au citron he was to pass on two more general aspects of the working life of a top sommelier. The first was just how much time he and his colleagues now have to spend on the internet, keeping up to date with prices on the fine wine market in general and in particular with the new releases from the smaller wine producers around the world whose wines distinguish one top list from another.

The second was how to make the most of your sommelier. "It doesn't have to be a hurried five minute conversation during the meal," Allauzen explained. "If the host can't get here a few minutes before his guests then a call the day before would always allow us to have some suitable suggestions ready. The more wine we sell, the happier I am."

The Greenhouse, 27A Hays Mews, London W1. 020-7499 3331. Closed Saturday Lunch and Sunday.