

Nicholas Lander offers advice on how to spend wisely on restaurant wine this Christmas and in 2002

2 Dec 2001 by JR

Caterer & Hotelkeeper, the British restaurant trade weekly, recently carried out a survey of wine prices in hotels and restaurants. Not surprisingly, it found a wide disparity in the selling prices of the same wines and consequently widely differing mark-ups. A bottle of New Zealand Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc that costs £8 from the importer is on the list at Ransome's Dock, SW11 at £20 but £55 at Hartwell House in Hertfordshire.

Comparisons are of course odious and affect not just the restaurant trade. Professional fees (and considerable expertise is implicit in the make-up and selling prices of menus and wine lists) vary in every field and in practice the basic economics of restaurants and hotels are quite different. Whilst an hotelier sets his rates to make a return on all the capital invested whether in the rooms, restaurant, wine cellar or health spa, chefs and restaurateurs operate within a much smaller arena and within a shorter time-frame. And now that very few restaurants have capital tied up in substantial cellars, wine sales are highly effective in cash-flow terms: wine merchants tend to be paid far more slowly than the fish, meat or vegetable suppliers.

But that is no excuse nor in fact the full explanation. Restaurateurs still manage to get away with excessive gross profits on their wine lists because they continue to trade on the general public's ignorance, a situation they exploit even further by wrapping up the wine list to resemble a biblical tome which they then hand over to a sinister over-dressed, often over-bearing sommelier or wine waiter.

That these characters still exist in the 21st century is baffling as there seems so little justification for them. Each restaurant should of course have a wine specialist but why does their more intimate knowledge of the wines under their care have to be so closely guarded? Wine lists are difficult enough to comprehend, incorporating different languages; unknown place names and regions; vintages over several decades; unpronounceable grape varieties and hugely differing prices - points of difference that rarely appear on menus today.

But all this information could very easily, and much more effectively and speedily, be conveyed by any thoughtful restaurateur armed with a computer, laser printer and the courage to dispense with one of the last remaining dinosaurs of the business.

Many sommeliers, who have the added physical advantage of hovering over you as you make your wine choice (a position not open to even the most aggressive chefs) can stack the cards even further in their favour by simply not sticking to even their own inscrutable rule book. An otherwise memorable dinner at Guy Savoy, the two-star Michelin restaurant in Paris, brought an encounter with a sommelier I would like to forget. A request for a bottle of burgundy from a reputable producer in a good vintage that cost £70 was greeted with the retort that it was not well-balanced. In which case, we wondered, why was it on the wine list? There was no doubt that his alternative which we were chivvied into ordering was good, but it was 40 per cent more expensive.

Wine professionals now input their notes, whether in individual producers' cellars or at major trade tastings, directly into their Palms or mini-computers. These can be instantly transferred to a wine list that can consequently be up to the minute and free from those annoying pencil marks that mean a wine is either out of stock or from another, possibly less good, vintage. This far more user-friendly approach, exemplified at Chanterelle, New York, Patina, Los Angeles, Rubicon in San Francisco and in London by Nigel Platts-Martin's group (Chez Bruce, The Glass House, and La Trompette) and, most personally, by Guiseppe Turi at Enoteca in Putney, London SW15, should be the standard bearer for the future.

Yet for any catholic wine enthusiast there is one positive benefit in this more antediluvian approach to wine and that is that in my experience there is invariably one seriously under-priced wine on every old-fashioned list. It could be in any section, so make sure that you have time to study the list by requesting a copy well in advance by post or email.

With the season for wine spending in restaurants now upon us here are a few other pointers to minimise expenditure and maximise pleasure:

- **House Wine:** With the disappearance of bad wine-making techniques generally there is no excuse for a bad house wine. Sadly, the word from several wine merchants is that many restaurateurs' current insistence on cost-cutting means that house wine can be the last repository of poor-quality wine. Always ask for a sample and if not impressed follow the tried and tested path of ordering the next most expensive wine on the list.
- **Discounts:** The wine trade usually offers restaurants incremental discounts beginning with orders of five cases or more. If your party is going to get through this quantity then make sure you get a deal.
- **Champagne:** Sales are slow worldwide due not just to world events but to a major hangover from the millennium. These means that not only is non-vintage champagne more mature than in the past but that there are deals to be had in restaurants as there are in so many wine shops.
- **Expensive wines:** There is no point in trying to do deals on wines that restaurateurs believe will mature in value as well as flavour but there is no doubt that certain wines such as expensive Californian Cabernet Sauvignons have been selling very, very slowly. An offer of a discount in return for a purchase of, say, six bottles may excite a restaurateur with stock particularly as several have been cancelling their forward purchases of more expensive wines, such as 1999 red burgundies, to improve cash flow.

Finally, as consumers become increasingly price-conscious, key price points have fallen. Those who would have spent £40 on a good bottle now want to spend no more than £30 whilst many of their American counterparts have reduced their spend from US \$70 to US \$40. Sensible restaurateurs are responding by bolstering the number of wines under these levels which will consequently harbour the best value for money in the year ahead.