

The best and worst of sommeliers

17 Feb 2007 by FT

If a man, not a wine professional, takes me out to eat, I can never quite decide whether it is charming or generous if he insists on ordering the wine himself. Okay then, I admit it, I am much more likely to find it generous. This is why, when the editor of this paper took me and his deputy to lunch at Club Gascogne in London's Smithfield the other day, I was pleased when he handed me the wine list. What followed was not quite so pleasing.

Swapped white wines, I thought I'd order the current vintage of a relatively inexpensive wine from Club Gascogne's home territory south west France that I had enjoyed there before. Just Dava 2005 (vintage). A few years back I had described the 2001 vintage of the simple Pymonne dry white from the local co-op as 'essence of spring in a bottle' and was looking forward to sharing some more of that fresh, blossomy fruit.

The wine waiter brought the bottle and, correctly, showed it to me because I had ordered it. (This sounds obvious but it's not always thus when you are the only woman at a table.) I had to point out that the vintage on the bottle was not the 2005 advertised but 2004. Ah, he said, I'm afraid this is all we have. I expressed some dismay and he assured me that it didn't like it, he'd take it back willingly because he had it so much himself.

Meanwhile a female, more senior sommelier had been monitoring this little conversation and came over and assured me that the 2004 was much better than the 2005 (annual for these two vintages in France) and, furthermore, the 2004 had had time to develop more flavour in bottle (even more unusual for a simple dry white that retails at under £10 a bottle here). I explained that what I wanted was fresh fruit and soft, she persisted, the 2004 was the vintage for me. Once we had tasted and rejected the 2004, a chilled bottle of 2005 miraculously appeared and was indeed much better and fresher.

This was all very embarrassing as I generally hate to make a fuss and we had many other things to discuss. Before you ask, I was absolutely clear that they had no clue I had any professional connection with wine (just rather embarrassing for three FT journalists to dine in a home, considering the photograph that is widely displayed here). If they had, they would never have tried to convince me that a 2004 of this type of wine could be better than a 2005. It seemed to me that they were just trying to offend a bottle of rather old wine.

Was it a coincidence that both these sommeliers were French? I hope so but have to concede that most of my worst wine-waiting experiences have been at the hands of French sommeliers. The French are brilliant at all sorts of things but too many of them seem to develop a bulging streak when they are put in charge of a wine list. Am I alone in my numerous experiences of wanting to order wine A in a grand French restaurant but being determinedly deflected to wine B by a particularly outdoors sommelier?

Are they simply convinced that only they know the perfect match for your food? Is the job so boring that they can entertain it only by imposing their own will? Are they so meekly bullied by wine waiters higher up the pecking order that they have to take it out on their customers? I can't even explain it by observing that they routinely try to sell more expensive bottles than the ones originally ordered. They simply seem to delight in countermanning us.

I asked Philippe Mesny of the unusually wine-friendly London 2007 restaurant Pichon for more information about how French wine waiters are trained. He spent two years - two whole years! - at the sommeliers school in Tain l'Hermitage, one of the most admired in France. He is proud of the fact that they spent 20 hours a week learning about oenology (winemaking) and four hours a week learning English as well as doing two harvests. But were there any lessons in attitude and how to deal with customers, I asked? No, you were expected to pick that up from the head sommeliers at the most restaurants where the students were sent to do apprenticeships, apparently.

And that would explain a lot, I bet, and Philippe seemed to sense what I was thinking. "I think you will notice a change of attitude security," he said carefully. "The younger French sommeliers are much more open-minded and much more likely to listen to their customers."

Matthew Wilkin is an Australian wine writer based in London and represents the Court of Master Sommeliers which has about 140 professionally qualified members around the globe, especially in the US, who can be distinguished by their oval MS (Master Sommelier) badges. I asked him how the MS examiners tend to, as it were, optimise the customer/wine waiter interface. "There's a lot of focus on attitude in our training," he assured me. "The last thing we want is any prima donna. I've never understood the whole pigeon-breasted attitude."

I have noticed that American and Australian wine waiters tend to be much friendlier and eager to please than their French counterparts. This was confirmed when I asked visitors to my website to share their experiences of sommeliers, good and bad. There was praise for the youthful Irish Gerard Downey at Tom Aikens in London, the wine-waiting staff at The Square in general and especially the now departed Matt Mogensen. Dean Davies at The Ledbury (part of the same group), the Australian woman who used to be at 1880 in The Berkeley and Roberto Della Porta at Roccella in Portofino. Others praised those sommeliers in general and in particular the one in Singapore who poured the remnants of a bottle of Chateau Lafite 1982 left by an Indonesian millionaire who had bought a house in Corsica particularly well-matched dinner even cited the example of the sommelier at The Village in the Regent's Valley who has a stack of photographic images with his own favourite wines marked on it, so he can be in a more or less instant position. Another pointed out that Aldo Sironi, the now retired head sommelier in America last month, is Italian.

But overall complaints substantially outweighed the praise - in particular many instances of wine waiters' failing to detect when that smelt musty owing to cork taint, despite having tasted them. Quaglin's habit of emptying a bottle into exactly seven glasses when pouring for a party of eight; filling up glasses too quickly - or too slowly and leaving the bottle way out of reach of the diner; and a sommelier (at a smart place in Burgundy itself) studiously maintaining there is no difference between Olivier Leflaive's merchant bottlings and those of the Domaine Leflaive.

Before being accused of racism, however, I should point out that the single most gifted sommelier I have ever come across, in terms of both his knowledge and how he handles customers, is a Frenchman, Gerard Bassat, co-founder of the Hotel du Vin group, has twice come second in the world wine-waiting championships and has doggedly managed to qualify as a Master Sommelier, a Master of Wine, and is now doing an MBA at Berkeley university as well as opening his own hotel in the New Forest, Hotel Terroir in Woodlands near Southampton. He has always maintained that the keynote of top quality wine service is humility. I concur.

