The best and worst of sommeliers

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

Swayed white-wards, I thought I'd order the current vintage of a relatively inexpensive wine from Club Gascon's home territory south west France that I had enjoyed there before, Xuri Danss 2005 Irouléguy. A few years back I had described the 2001 vintage of this simple Pyrenean 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 'tis 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 if I didn't like it, he'd take it back willingly because he liked it so much himself.

Meanwhile a female, more senior sommelier had been monitoring this little contretemps and came over and assured me that the 2004 was much better than the 2005 (unusual 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 retail). I explained that what I wanted was fresh fruit and still, she persisted, the 2004 was the vintage for me. Once we had tasted and rejected the tired 2004, a chilled bottle of 2005 miraculously appeared and was indeed much better and fresher.

This was all very embarrassing as I genuinely hate to make a fuss and we had many other things to discuss. Before you ask, it was absolutely clear that they had no clue I had any professional connection with wine (itself rather embarrassing for three FT journalists so close to home, considering the photograph that is weekly 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 offload 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 bullying 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 stubborn sommelier?

Are they simply convinced that only they know the perfect match for your food? Is the job so boring that they can enliven it only by imposing their own will? Are they so mercilessly 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 countermanding us.

I asked Philippe Mercy of the unusually wine-friendly London SW3 restaurant Papillon for more information about how French wine waiters are trained. He spent two years – two whole years! – at the sommellerie school in Tain l'Hermitage, one of the most admired of several 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 smart restaurants where the students were sent to do apprenticeships, apparently.

Aha! Well that would explain a lot, I felt, and Philippe seemed to sense what I was thinking. "I think you will notice a change of attitude recently," 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 waiter 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 lapel badges. I asked him how the MS examiners tried to, as it were, optimise the customer/wine waiter interface. "There's lots of focus on attitude in our training," he assured me. "The last thing we want is any prima donnas. I've never understood the whole pigeon-breasted attitude."

I have certainly 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 Gearóid Devaney at Tom Aikens in London, the wine waiting staff at The Square in general and especially the now departed Marc Molgroux, Dawn Davies at The Ledbury (part of the same group), the Australian woman who used to be at 1880 in The Bentley and Roberto Della Pietra at Roussillon in Pimlico. Others praised Asian sommeliers in general and in particular the one in Singapore who poured the remains of a bottle of Château Lafleur 1982 left by an Indonesian millionaire who hadn't bothered to finish it. One particularly well-travelled diner even cited the example of the sommelier at Tra Vigne in St Helena in the Napa Valley who has a stack of photocopied maps with his own favourite wineries marked on it, so keen is he to answer an oft-asked question. Another pointed out that Aldo Sohm, the man voted best sommelier in America last month, is Austrian.

But overall complaints substantially outweighed the praise – in particular many instances of wine waiters' failing to detect wines that smell musty owing to cork taint, despite having tasted them; Quaglino'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) stoutly 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. Gérard Basset, a 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 Bordeaux university as well as opening his own hotel in the New Forest, Hotel TerroVina in Woodlands near Southampton. He has always maintained that the keynote of top quality wine service is humility. I concur.