New BYO scheme for London

9 Jun 2010 by Jancis Robinson

It is a common complaint among serious wine lovers that they drink worse wine when they go out to eat than they do at home, because they resent paying the high mark-ups that are imposed on most restaurant wine lists. We have certainly discussed this at length in our Members' forum.

An enterprising couple of London wine lovers, Christopher and Khadine Rose, have set up the BYO Wine Club to address this issue. Members pay a fee of £75 a year (introductory offer, rising to £99) for the privilege of being able to take their own bottles to a roster of restaurants around the capital. Each restaurant sets their own terms and conditions. At Rowley Leigh's Café Anglais in Bayswater, for instance, club members can take up to one bottle a head for lunch and dinner on any day except Sunday, so long as there are no more than six at the table. Tom Aikens offers free corkage on up to one bottle per person but only at weekday lunches and Monday and Tuesday dinner, while at Rasoi Vineet Bhatia round the corner, corkage is waived for club members on weekday lunches so long as they spend at least £21 a head. At L'Oranger in St James's, corkage is either £15 a bottle or zero, depending on day of the week and whether dinner or lunch, with a 15% service charge added to the bill.

All these details are spelt out for each restaurant on www.byowineclub.com. Members may make bookings for up to eight people in most instances, so for most serious wine lovers and trencherpersons, it should not take many bookings to earn back the membership fee. The Roses say that they do not take a fee from participating restaurants - although perhaps they should in these economically straitened times? In any event, their list of restaurants is varied and pretty high quality. While it may not include any three-star establishments, nor any of the particularly wine-friendly Platts-Martin group (Square, Ledbury, Chez Bruce, Trompette, Glasshouse), I saw no restaurant I would not be happy to dine in. The organisers promise a selection of 50 restaurants by the end of next week when the first members receive their membership cards and discreet bottle carriers.

The guidance below to members gives a flavour of the club:

Bring Your Own is a privilege extended by participating restaurants to BYO Wine Club. If abused, these restaurants may remove themselves from our website - to the detriment of all of our members. Accordingly, please:

Do not bring any bottle format smaller than 375ml (half). Bottles larger than 1.5L (magnum) are permitted at the discretion of the restaurant.

Do not bring an open bottle of wine unless agreed with the restaurant in advance.

Do not bring homemade wine or boxed wine. Only commercially made wine in a sealed bottle is permitted.

Do not bring beer, cider, alcopops or spirits. Only wine and champagne are permitted.

Do not knowingly bring exactly the same wine that is on the restaurant's list.

Do bring wines on par with at least some of the wines on the restaurant's own list. If you feel the need to bring a truly inexpensive bottle, it's best to do so at a comparably inexpensive restaurant.

Do exercise discretion when handing your wine over to the restaurant staff. We encourage you to use the wine carrier included in your member's welcome kit. When this is not practical, kindly discard any carrier bags or other packaging before entering the restaurant and present the bottle on its own.

Do peruse the wine list whilst at participating restaurants. Owners and managers have spent a lot of time and effort putting them together and you might find some hidden gems that you want to try should you return on a non-Club night.

Do offer the sommelier a taste of your wine -- it's just a nice thing to do.

Should you decide to join this new scheme, do please report back on how it works. It would be good to hear how it goes from the restaurants' point of view too. Obviously the restaurateurs will need to brief their staff well. I'm surprised in a way that more restaurateurs don't insist that members buy at least one bottle from their list at full price.

And don't forget: no alcopops!

www.byowineclub.com