

How to be a sommelier

29 Jun 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

For several very different reasons I recently accepted an invitation to be one of the five judges of the UK Sommelier of the Year 2011 Award. It was won by Frenchman Yohann Jousselein of The Vineyard at Stockcross, Berkshire, on his sixth attempt.

The first had been a comment from a New York restaurateur that sommeliers are becoming restaurants' new superstars but that there is currently an acute shortage of good ones in his city.

Then there was the introduction from London restaurateur Sam Hart to Jack Lewens, who trained at London's River Café before becoming a wine broker in Hong Kong. Hart has appointed Lewens as wine buyer for his three restaurants, Fino, Barrafinna and Quo Vadis, because wine now accounts for half his company's total sales and, Hart felt, he could no longer give it the attention it deserves. Lewens' first initiative, redesigning the place mat that serves as the menu at Barrafinna to give wine greater prominence, led to a 2% increase in wine sales in its first week.

Then there was an email from Anthony Hanson, a Master of Wine and Director of Christie's Wine Department. He was going to a private dinner at The Gilbert Scott and had wanted to take along, and pay an appropriate corkage on, a bottle of wine from his personal cellar that the restaurant simply could not match. He was told that this was not possible, that this gesture of goodwill was not in their management handbook.

During the course of an exhausting day, the 16 finalists in the sommelier competition were subject to a rigorous examination. The morning's written exam had whittled the number down to three (Jousselein plus Loic Avril, another Frenchman, and Lukasz Kolodziejczyk, a Pole, both from The Fat Duck), who in front of an audience, including those they had just bettered, had to identify two wines, and pair them with a suitable dish; identify eight spirits including the now rarely seen Tia Maria; open and pour a magnum of champagne into 16 glasses to a consistent level, without, of course, going back. They also had to pass what looked to me as I first walked into the room very like a drugs test.

Matt Wilkin, a respected sommelier turned wine merchant, was on the stage doing a very good impression of a crack cocaine dealer. In his hand was a brown envelope from which he poured a stream of bright wine crystals. Rather than put these anywhere near his nose, however, he poured them into a bottle of white wine to provide the contestants' final hurdle. These were harmless tartaric acid crystals that are often precipitated in white wines, particularly German wines. The finalists would have to explain to a table of customers what precisely these were and why they could safely enjoy the wine.

As the sommeliers did so, they could personally witness the relief and pleasure on the faces of those that they were serving, a privilege that is rarely ever available to any chef. But this direct interaction is one of the principal reasons that attracts so many to this profession.

A conversation with Allegra Angelo, a 30-year-old sommelier at a group of three restaurants in Miami, Florida, exemplified this. She passed over the more mundane details of her role - the deliveries, dealing with drinkers of nothing other than diet Coke and the late nights - in her enthusiasm to talk about what really excites her.

'It's our job to teach and inspire, especially the people who are just starting to drink wine. And it is also our job to be conscious of peoples' wallets, offering and recommending quality in wines under US\$50 per bottle. But what makes my job meaningful is being the direct link to the guest, watching them fall in love with a particular dish or convincing them to pour a glass of sweet Moscatel Dulce into a warm brioche pudding. And then telling them to come back when we are about to introduce an older vintage of a wine that they have always enjoyed.'

I was the inadvertent beneficiary of the intimate relationship that can develop between a sensitive sommelier and his customers at a recent, excellent, dinner at Medlar, which opened in April way down London's Kings Road.

Medlar is a partnership between Joe Mercier Nairne in the kitchen and David O'Connor in the restaurant, both of whom worked under the inspirational Bruce Poole at Chez Bruce in Wandsworth, with which it shares many admirable characteristics.

The dining room is comfortable but not ostentatious (Medlar's lighting is particularly good). They bake their own excellent breads. The fixed-price menu is compact, highly seasonal and expressed in such a way that a considerable amount of thought and care has gone into its construction. The persillade of snails added another dimension to the steak, the garlic scrapes did the same for three different renditions of rabbit. Their cheese board, too, is exemplary.

And in Clement Robert (pictured, by Jean Goldsmith), Medlar possesses a French sommelier who has won the Young Sommelier of the Year competition in the past. He is bright, quick on his feet and readily aware of what his customers want and will make them happy.

Two wines on his list are from Domaine Mathis Bastian in Luxembourg, and before we ordered the 2009 Pinot Noir, we asked Robert why we should. 'There are several reasons', he replied. 'I'm a fan of the producer and he's organic. But the main reason is that we have a very good customer who comes from Luxembourg but now lives nearby. So he is always very happy to come here and order these.'

The wine is light, fresh and suited a warm evening and such good food. When we responded that this was a style that was unlikely to appeal to an Australian reared on much stronger stuff, Robert's response was immediate. 'For sure', he added with a smile.

Another sommelier had shown quite how easy it can be to bridge that often awkward gap between the restaurant and the customer.

Medlar, www.medlarrestaurant.co.uk