

Wine - restaurants' lifeblood

29 Jun 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT

Since Nick is straying into my territory this week by [writing about sommeliers](#), I thought I would venture into his to consider restaurant wine lists and the changing relationship between restaurants and wine.

One very obvious development is that, outside France, red bordeaux has virtually disappeared from the lists of all but the most classic establishments with their own, long-cherished cellars. It's easy to see why restaurant owners are wary of serious bordeaux that has to be bought young and matured for years before it's ready to drink, but more difficult to see why the many bargains in the lower ranks are ignored, especially since red bordeaux is, quintessentially, a wine to be drunk with food. Perhaps it is partly because it can be difficult to identify the stars in the vast firmament of lesser bordeaux, and also because the wine companies that specialise in supplying restaurants have given up on the hauteur, and outrageous pricing, associated with France's biggest fine-wine region.

In the UK at least there has until recently been a sharp divide between the rest of the wine trade and the companies prepared to jump through the hoops associated with supplying restaurants, including daily deliveries and credit lines as long as the finish on a Cheval Blanc 1947. But now that the high street chains have disappeared and it has become virtually impossible to make any money selling to the supermarkets, more and more British wine merchants are turning towards bars, gastropubs and restaurants for new sales opportunities. But there is such a well-established nucleus of specialists in supplying what is known as the 'on trade' (as opposed to off licences) that I find I often take a look at a wine list and can see immediately whether the dominant supplier is, for example, Bibendum (telltale wines include La Serre, d'Arenberg), Liberty (Kim Crawford, Fontodi) or Caves de Pyrène (offbeat names from French byways such as Domaine des Roches Neuves).

The advance in the UK of one particular style of wine, so-called natural wine with minimal chemical additions about which I wrote last October in [Naked as nature intended?](#), has been greatly accelerated by the close relationships between Caves de Pyrène, their chief British promulgator, and individual sommeliers. As ex Oddbins wine buyer Steve Daniel, who now buys for restaurant supplier Novum, points out, selling wine to restaurants is quite different from selling wine to any other sort of trade customer. Wine price and quality, delivery and payment terms all pale into insignificance beside personal relationships. 'In restaurants it's all about who you know', he insists.

I always know when wine trade tastings are primarily aimed at sommeliers because they are (a) timed for immediately before or after lunch service and (b) full of twenty-something foreigners who taste in packs like thirsty, loquacious wolves. It takes some confidence to spend your boss's money on a commodity as arcane as wine, so it can be reassuring to get other people's opinions, especially those of your countrymen. And it is hugely important to wine salesmen aiming at the restaurant trade to target the people with access to the purse strings, and to convince them that only you know the way, the truth and the light as far as wine knowledge is concerned.

As a wine-drinking restaurant customer who understands well that the profits generated by the bottles I order are subsidising the meals of teetotalers (margins are traditionally lower on food than drink, which is another, major topic covered by Nick in [A wine-pricing manifesto](#)), I am delighted when I see evidence that a wine list has been supplied by a variety of different merchants. It suggests to me that some creative thought has gone into assembling the range.

And I am not necessarily impressed by very long or very thick wine lists. They can take an age to wade through, at a time when I really want to pay attention to my fellow diners. I'd rather have two or three well-chosen vintages or producers of a particular wine than an exhaustive display of them all. Selection is a virtue. An alternative that is increasingly adopted by more digitally aware establishments is to have the wine list available online for pre-emptive study by real wine enthusiasts, although creativity and rigour are needed to keep the list up to date.

The day of the annually printed wine list is surely well and truly over. There are few more dated sights in a restaurant than an expensively printed wine list with manual amendments. The joy of daily changing menus and print on demand is that it can be so easy to keep wine lists au courant with the latest stock depletions. The iPad is slowly but steadily making its presence felt as an adjunct to selling wine in restaurants, particularly in Asia and the US. Early adopters are not necessarily brilliant executioners in my experience. European exceptions include sommelier Colm McCan at Ballymaloe in Ireland's County Cork and the modern temple to connoisseurship Monvinic in Barcelona. See our list of [recommended](#)

[iPad restaurant wine lists](#) around the world.

Another long-overdue development in the UK is the increase in wines available by the glass and sometimes - as at the related Arbutus, Wild Honey and Les Deux Salons in central London – sensible 25 cl (third of a bottle) carafe. Hallelujah! American restaurateurs have long offered this sort of option (and complex flights of different but related wines too) and at last their British counterparts are catching up. I for one am rather worried about the increasing tendency, in British bars anyway, to treat 17.5 cl as a standard glassful. It contains roughly twice as much alcohol as the standard unit that the medical profession is always berating us with. So I am delighted to learn that the British government is set to allow measures smaller than the old standard wine glass measure, 12.5 cl, to be sold legally – see [Small sips to be allowed at last](#). (Only 17.5 and 12.5 cl have been allowed, with anything smaller attracting objections on Weights & Measures grounds.) This also opens the doors to the possibility of offering wine flights, for example.

There are many ways to present an array of wines on a restaurant list, geographically and stylistically being the two most common. But I suspect for most diners who are less fixated by wine than I am, the most sensible way to present a reasonably small collection is to list by colour and then upwards by price. Most people know far more about how much they want to spend than about where each wine comes from.

These are my favourite London wine lists:

Chez Bruce, SW17

The Glasshouse, Kew

The Greenhouse, W1

Hunan, SW1

The Ledbury, W11

Ransome's Dock, SW11

The Square, W1

La Trompette, W4