Sommeliers I have known

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Purple pagers also wade into the discussion about sommeliers (and wine lists) in Parisian wine lists, waiters and Beaujolais, Vegetarian sommeliers, and French sommeliers.

I had my most salutary wine-list experience ever in the tenebrous restaurant of the old Hotel Infante Sagres in Oporto on my first visit to northern Portugal. I had been writing about wine for all of a year and had raced through the Wine & Spirit Education Trust courses, so of course thought I knew it all.

But to my horror, on looking at the list of wines offered by Infante Sagres, I recognised not a single one apart from Mateus Rosé. It made me realise that the sort of rabbit-in-headlights sensation I was having was probably how most people feel when they look at any wine list. Unless you are a wine nut or wine student, wine lists presumably all too often look like a mass of meaningless, generally foreign, words with frightening numbers at the end of them. No wonder, then, that the typical diner-out seizes with relief on the few names that look reassuringly familiar.

The big difference between wine lovers and professionals on one side and normal people on the other is that those of us in the first group tend to look down a wine list and order what is not familiar, the exact opposite of what those in the second group do. We seek the stimulation of that obscure little Spanish denomination or a weird and wonderful grape we've only read about. They head with relief for the Pinot Grigio.

Another big difference between the two camps in my experience is the extent to which we are prepared to ask for advice. For those of us in the wine world, some of our best friends are sommeliers. We know that some of them are extremely knowledgeable and we also know that good ones should know their list backwards. If the list is not too ridiculously long (and some of them are), the sommelier should know the maturity and characteristics of each wine. The other night over dinner at Dinner, Heston Blumenthal's confusingly named new restaurant in London's Mandarin Oriental hotel, Michael Hill Smith MW, fellow wine writer Andrew Jefford, my restaurant critic husband Nick Lander and I positively grilled sommelier João Pires about exactly how all the dry Rieslings on his list were tasting, in far more detail, I suspect, than any wine neophyte would. My suspicion is that the average restaurant customer thinks it is a sign of weakness to ask questions of the sommelier, feeling that his (or occasionally her) relationship with the average wine waiter is naturally adversarial. 'Who is going to win financially from this transaction, me or the restaurant?' seems to be a common concern on the part of diners out.

I also suspect that wine professionals are less embarrassed than most customers by ordering an inexpensive bottle from a wine list - probably because we know exactly how big the mark-ups are, and know that we will not lack opportunities to drink good stuff unencumbered by 300% margins.

But I have certainly had more than my fair share of bad sommelier experiences - particularly in France, as it happens, even if one of my favourite sommeliers anywhere is based in Paris, the Italian-born Enrico Bernardo (pictured above), who won World's Best Sommelier in 2004 and now runs his own wine-focused restaurant Il Vino, where you are expected to choose the wine and then let them choose and cook suitable dishes for those wines. (Enrico was originally an award-winning chef and has a wonderful sensibility for food and flavours too.) He shares with French-born British resident Gérard Basset, who won the financially valuable World's Best Sommelier title in 2010, the most attractive qualities in any sommelier: enthusiasm and humility.

These are conspicuously missing in far too many traditional sommeliers. I try to avoid national stereotyping - honestly, I do - but … there is a certain type of French wine waiter at whose hands I continue to suffer. Worse, it is all my fault. Let us call this chap Bête Noire. He is haughty and expressionless but doubt doth not assail him. We have settled ourselves at the table in his very French establishment somewhere in the world (not always France). When he suggests an aperitif I ask for the wine list. I'd like a glass of wine as my aperitif but if it's not champagne, this rather upsets his routine.

We are forced into the approved rhythm of the restaurant, ordering our food and then waiting for an audience with the sommelier. I've had quite a long time to study the wine list and have decided after much thought that I'd like to drink wines A and B with our meal. Silly me. Monsieur Bête Noire disapproves. No, A and B wouldn't be suitable at all. We'd be much better off with X and Y. X and Y are usually but not always more expensive than A and B - but I don't think this encounter is principally financially inspired, it's more about power. The sommelier is probably not that well paid. The rewards of the

job, other than the tasting samples, are, I must assume, imposing your will on the customer. So, time and time again, I allow myself to be dissuaded from my original choices and deflected towards the wines the sommelier wants to sell me. I've had countless bad experiences of this. The suggested bottles usually turn out to be disappointing and I think wistfully about my original choices - though at the sort of prices these restaurants charge, I'm certainly not going to order them as well. But each time I find myself - yes, like a rabbit in the headlights - thinking that perhaps at last this is the one sommelier who really knows his stuff and his wines better than I do.

It could well be of course that he is dissuading me from my original choices because he knows he hasn't got them in stock. Or it could just be that he is playing some sort of game. I do know that one day when my husband used to have a (relatively relaxed) restaurant, the staff had a sweepstake to see who could manage the most instances of selling bin 1 to table 1, bin 6 to table 6 and so on. Or it could just be that the sommelier is frustrated by the rigid hierarchy in traditional French restaurants and is taking it out on me.

Whatever the reason, I so much prefer the creativity and playfulness of the wine list and wine service at a restaurant where the customer is king such as Union Square Café in New York, on whose wine list, as on those of its several sister establishments, I always find something new and stimulating.