

[SOMMELIER SECRETS: How to tame the terror of ordering wine at a posh restaurant](#)

- Stephen Yafa, Special to The Chronicle
Thursday, May 11, 2006



To the casual observer, it probably looks like a friendly chat between dining customer and restaurant wine director. The beads of sweat on your forehead tell a different story.

You intended to impress your date by taking her to one of the city's most elegant fine-dining establishments. Moments after being seated, you've been presented with a leather-bound wine list the size of the Manhattan telephone directory. Fifteen hundred wines and not one word of useful description on any of them.

Good luck.

Calling over the wine director, aka the sommelier, isn't turning out to be much of a solution. When you tell him you're considering a Pinot Grigio to accompany your date's grilled halibut, his haughty smirk reduces you to a bread crumb: "Have you considered the Villa Sparina?" he asks. "Pinot Grigio might be a bit like driving a four-cylinder compact next to the Sparina Cortese, which I can assure you, is a Porsche by comparison."

As you mop your brow, your date looks over at you lovingly and asks a silent question: "Could you possibly be so stupid as to not take this man's expert advice?"

What to do? For any of us who have been there, lost at sea in an oceanic wine list and desperate for a captain who won't treat us like a lowly deck swab, there ought to be a primer on how to befriend a sommelier to sail us safely to port with a smile on our face and a delicious wine in our glass.

Searching for such a tip sheet, I corralled four of San Francisco's finest sommeliers -- Eugenio Jardim from Jardiniere, Peter Palmer from Farallon, Jason Alexander from Gary Danko and Shelley Lindgren from A16 -- and twisted their corkscrews until they revealed everything you and I will ever need to know to make our next encounter with an impenetrable wine list, and the person holding it, go down as smoothly as a Gevrey-Chambertin.

I asked that the wine directors bring to our roundtable at Jardiniere two wines from their lists that they were madly, deeply passionate about -- one under \$35, and one above.

For the next two hours they drank, compared, joked, and divulged a few choice secrets of their trade.

Of course there are times when that fat 1,000-bottle tome lands on your table and there's simply no way to ignore it.

You may in fact be seeking it out at celebratory restaurant like Jardiniere, where Jardim carries 30 different Champagnes. Or you may opt for the formal opulence of Restaurant Gary Danko, where Alexander presides over a 1,200-bottle list billed on the Danko Web site to be "thick with verticals of classic wines, including the remarkable Grand Cru vineyards of Burgundy."

You've come to indulge, celebrate, or maybe to impress business clients. Whatever the occasion, you don't relish being clobbered into submission by a snooty sommelier.

Wine consultant Jennifer Chotzi Rosen's been there. At the highest levels, she weighs in on her Web site, "a Master Sommelier spends years cramming for the vinous equivalent of law boards. All that pressure building up in his brain!" By asking questions about the list that allow him to share some of that knowledge, she adds, "you will act as a release valve.... He will keep returning to get more of this drug that is you."

The four wine directors I gathered at the Jardiniere roundtable were quick to agree. Their deepest secret is they want to be in the service of someone who cares. Forget the "Aw, shucks, just bring me anything" country-cousin act. They respond to customers who appreciate their work and show genuine curiosity.

Ask questions

A few well-aimed questions announce your interest: Do you personally taste all of the wines? (They do, with rare exceptions.) What do you recommend? And the piece de resistance: Which wines on this list are you passionate about?

When you ask any wine director about personal favorites you're engaging him in a hot-tub conversation. You're getting down to naked emotion, and that's where you want to be.

"An amazing thing happens," says Food Network celebrity sommelier Andrea Immer-Robinson. "The wine director becomes your soul brother or sister. You may soon find yourself being given special treatment, asked for your opinion on different samples the somm brings over. You're a customer they want to cultivate."

Inside every wine director there's a child who can't wait to show you his or her new toys.

But passion, of course, doesn't always end in a mad embrace. What to do if the wine director or waiter persuades you to try a bottle of wine she swoons over, but it doesn't light your fire? Do you risk insult or gut it out and kiss this off as a \$50 learning experience?

"I tell my customers to let me know," says Lindgren of A16. "And I assure them if they decide to send it back, the wine won't go to waste."

She might lose a bottle, but she's likely to gain a loyal patron.

After nine years as wine director at Farallon, Peter Palmer can predict with confidence that once a month on average somebody will order an unfamiliar wine at his suggestion, sip it and hate it.

What does he do?

"If it's based on my recommendation, I'll whisk it away," he says.

Codes of conduct

There are no firm rules of engagement, but there are a few unwritten codes of conduct. Wine directors -- and waiters -- generally don't mind pouring a small free sample of a wine they're enthused about, if it is being served by the glass.

But when a customer refuses to buy a recommended bottle until it's opened at the table for him to taste and consider, he's guilty of boorish behavior.

Jerks come in a variety of flavors and vintages, young and old. They have one thing in common, says Peter Granoff, a master sommelier. They're almost always male.

"You rarely see that kind of ego thing in women," says Granoff, a managing partner in Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant.

At the now-departed San Francisco restaurant Square One, Granoff ran into a self-appointed wine expert who pored through the restaurant's hefty list of Bordeaux and Burgundies in the process of teaching his two young male companions how to order a bottle and order around a wine director.

Slamming the list shut, the customer threw a fit.

"Don't you have any wines of consequence?" he thundered.

"Apparently not," said Granoff, walking away.

Driving home in the early morning, Granoff thought of what he wished he had said: "Yes I do, but I reserve them for customers of consequence."

Another rule, according to the Jardiniere bunch and every other wine director with whom I spoke: Don't hesitate to let the waiter or sommelier know your budget.

"If I see the customer's with a business associate or that a discussion of cost is otherwise awkward," Jardim explains, "I'll ask the person to give me an idea of a wine they like, and when I point to it on the list, I'm putting my finger on the price, not the wine, and asking: 'Something like that?' One nod, and we've exchanged enough information for me to be helpful."

"Give us a clear message, and we'll take it from there," says Immer-Robinson.

In all respects, in fact, your job as the customer is to provide the wine director or waiter with as much information as possible to come away with a bottle you savor at a price you can afford. That, of course, is also why Jardim and the others ask what sort of style you prefer.

Ah, but here's the rub: "How many times have we all heard in the restaurant business, a person who says, 'I like my Chardonnays dry,' and I say, 'Really? Describe to me one you like,' and the first wine they name is the biggest butterball on my list! I could dip my bread in it," Jardim says, as every other wine director at the round table laughs and nods in agreement.

What to do?

"You offer them something close to the wine they like, not necessarily the style they say they like," Lindgren of A16 explains.

BYOB etiquette

When I ask for their thoughts on customers who bring their own bottles, I'm quickly buried under an avalanche of pent-up frustration. At their own high-end restaurants, they agree, you won't win any friends by showing up with a half case of mid-range Merlot you picked up around the corner at Beverages & More.

You're much better advised to be packing a collector's item, say a rare Beerenauslese you and your WWII army buddy, Pete, brought back from Germany in '45, or a prized bottle your father gave you from his cellar before he died. And you'll do yourself a favor by offering a taste of it to your waiter and the wine director.

"No matter what you're planning to bring," says Palmer, "I suggest phoning ahead to let the restaurant know. It's gracious, and if the wine needs to be decanted, even better to drop it off a few days ahead to let the sediment settle."

Ratings don't matter

Another poorly hidden secret of sommeliers is that they pay little or no attention to Wine Spectator or Robert M. Parker Jr., or anyone else's wine ratings. The highest of those ratings are usually awarded to massive, stand-alone specimens. Wine, as every sommelier knows, was put on earth by the gods to make sure we clean our plates with glee.

The ones that work best with a meal carry enough mouthwatering, crisp acidity to bolster the food, and to be enhanced by it in return. They're not heavily oaked or so extracted that you can't taste anything but the wine itself.

Says Jardim: "I tell a customer who says, 'Why don't you carry this Parker 100-point wine?' that if I serve you a wine you don't like, I'll be right here to talk about it. But if I serve a wine that Parker loves and you don't like it, I won't be able to get him on the phone for you."

Wine directors make their buying decisions based on the wine's compatibility with the chef's style (see story this page), even if they don't get to taste many of the dishes.

For all those reasons, "I ask the group, 'Do you recommend European more often than domestic wines?' "

The conversation comes to a crashing halt. Nervous titters; profound silence. Finally Jardim, a supremely cosmopolitan gent, speaks up: "Let us say, diplomatically, that wines grown in cooler appellations retain more acidity."

No subject elicits so much fury among vinophile bloggers in chat rooms and forums as the price markup on restaurant wines.

"What restaurants think of as fair markup has always struck me as extortion based on the fact that their wine is all you have to choose from, short of bringing your own."

That's Stevemore in Bellvue, Wash., on wineaccess.com's reader forum, speaking for thousands of captive customers. Currently wine is often priced up to three times wholesale at many restaurants, or double its retail price.

Jardim and his cohorts talk at length about "the tremendous cost involved in proper wine service" -- purchasing special towels for wiping glasses, hiring someone just to polish them, the delicate maintenance and the toll racked up by breakage, about 100 glasses a month.

But as a customer, the information you want to garner from your server or sommelier is all about value, not cost -- that is, what wines in the range you can afford represent the best value for your money.

The answer is often a wine you've never heard of, or a variety you rarely drink -- a Muscadet, for instance, or a well-crafted rosé.

All of which leads to the one crucial question you're encouraged to ask: which of the wines we're thinking about are best suited to the dishes we're ordering? Any worthy sommelier should be ready to answer with dispatch.

Lindgren, for one, can rattle off half a dozen sensational varieties from Apulia, Italy's boot, that you may know nothing about.

In order to make her suggestions, of course, she needs to know your food selections. But in the cockeyed world of American restaurant service, waiters take wine orders first.

"Can I start you with something to drink?" the waiter asks.

"Why don't we get some wine for the table," you might suggest. Your menu, most likely, hasn't yet been opened. A more logical strategy, the sommeliers advise, is of course to first figure out what you're eating. When you do, and the table's choices swing from duck confit to watercress soup, it's a good time to call over the wine director and let the good times roll. That's when the fun begins.

As for the wine lists themselves, every list reflects the personal preferences of the sommelier who created it; they're likely to be the same wines you're going to be most satisfied in ordering.

"If you take the time to look at a list, you'll notice each one has something peculiar," says Jardim. "There'll be a lot of small Spanish producers, maybe, or lots of Austrian whites. So when I look I say to myself, 'Let me see what this guy likes,' and that's usually where I'll go as a customer if it suits my food."

Palmer points out that Farallon's emphasis on seafood generates his list's heavy emphasis on whites. Still, he loves Pinot Noir and Burgundy from small producers. There are two full pages on his list, and only one for Cabernet.

"Carrying 400 wines gives me a chance to do it all, from wines the staff loves to famous wines to producers of 25 cases. All those considerations go into constructing the list," he says.

Alexander stresses his favorites at Gary Danko as well -- Rieslings, Rhones and Burgundies.

That leads me to a question that might be yours as well: why should I have to work this hard? Do I really want to do battle with 400 or more wines -- all presented with no useful information

other than variety, vintage and region?

I can't tell whether a 2003 Core Elevation Sensation Santa Barbara (Mourvedre/Grenache/Syrah) will complement my pan-roasted drunken quail with fiddlehead ferns, roasted spring garlic and rhubarb-apple compote better than a 2001 Talisman Thorn Vineyard Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir when I dine at trendy Bacar, for instance, where partner and wine director Debbie Zacharias has assembled a stunning 38-page list, her way: alphabetized by country, region and variety.

There are more than a thousand wines on the Bacar list, and not one word of description about any of them.

"Flavor profiles on a wine list," Zacharias says, "drive me crazy."

That's after I ask her if it doesn't perhaps make sense to break down her wines for the unenlightened customer by light, medium and full-bodied at the very least.

"Any wine director can tell you in seconds what wines on their list match your flavor profile," she replies.

When I ask that same question of to Jardim, Alexander, Lindgren and Palmer, they look at me like I'm fresh off the boat.

Maybe I am. But my best guess is none of these folks wants their list to substitute for the pleasure of being on the floor, one-on-one with customers. That's where they live, in the dialogue that produces a perfect pairing. They may have a point. Perhaps all you really need to know, in the end, is not how to read between the lines, but how to ask, listen, sip and enjoy.

"My favorites at Gary Danko as well- rieslings, rhones and burgundies."

Jason Alexander, Gary Danko

"If I serve a wine that Parker loves and you don't like it, I won't be able to get him on the phone for you."

Eugenio Jardim, Jardiniere

"No matter what you're planning to bring, I suggest phoning ahead to let the restaurant know."

Peter Palmer, Farallon

"You offer them something close to the wine they like, not necessarily the style they say they like."

Shelley Lindgren, A16

What the somms sip

To a round-table discussion at Jardiniere, Stephen Yafa asked four San Francisco sommeliers to bring two of their favorite wines -- one less than \$35, more than \$35. Their picks and comments are below, with restaurant prices, since most of the wines are difficult to find in retail stores in

these vintages.

Peter Palmer

Farallon

2004 Domaine de la Tourmaline Muscadet (\$28)

With its bracing minerality and citrus, this Muscadet soars as a celestial complement to cold oysters.

2002 Mount Eden Estate

Santa Cruz Mountains

Pinot Noir (\$68)

Ripe, plummy, with loads of blueberry and black cherry, this concentrated, distinctly California Pinot displays enough acid along with earthy components to pair perfectly with water fowl.

Jason Alexander

Gary Danko

2004 Domaine Ehrhart

Vielle Vignes Riesling (\$32)

Pure stone fruit, especially apricot, comes of age exquisitely in a dry Alsatian wine with nutty flavors and bright acids. Drink with spicy foods and white meats.

2004 Domaine Jean-Marc

Brocard Premier Cru Montée

de Tonnerre Chablis (\$52)

Steely, non-oaked, and as fragrant as lemon rind, the Chablis holds its own as a noble companion for shellfish. Let it warm a little to enjoy its full range of flavor.

Shelley Lindgren

A16

2004 I Sibilla Crona De Lago Campi Flegrei Campania

Falanghina (\$27)

The historic white wine of the region that includes Naples, Falanghina holds its own paired with intense Campania foods. Straw-like in color, this version combines melon with spring flowers and minerals. It works well with seafood, shellfish and mild cheeses.

2002 Palari Faro (\$90)

A delicious red blend of Nerollo Moscalese, Nerello Capuccio and Nocera that seems to have picked up the volcanic minerality of Mt. Edna and layered it with dark, ripe berries. It adds gusto to any red meat or game without competing for dominance.

Eugenio Jardim

Jardiniere

NV Pierre Moncuit

Blanc de Blanc

Les Mesnil-sur-Oger (\$80)

Bracing, bright and as sunny as springtime captured in glass, this Champagne comes from a small grower and tastes like purity itself. Lightly toasted and infinitely well-balanced, it will shine with any shellfish and make you stand up and salute the raw oysters you eat with it.

2002 Thierry Allemand

Cornas (\$120)

A wine that displays the best of pure Syrah fruit, and has settled down to resolve its tannins. It's superbly concentrated with enough acid to complement savory meats, with an olive spiciness all its own.

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