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Wine



Hedda Johnson

The Simplified Art of Ordering Wine

A friend of mine, who necessarily spends a lot of time in Texas, returned from one such foray with the wine list from a small-town cafe. It read like this:

WINE LIST

Red.....\$5
White.....\$5
No substitutes.

That has to be the ultimate, no-problem wine list. No sweaty palms when the sommelier approaches in that place. Still, even a Texan must tire of such a selection after a while. Let's face it: Sooner or later there comes a time when each of us must face up to the *carte des vins*.

Until recently, most wine

lists seemed to have been designed to be intimidating. Restaurants where lists of wines with unpronounceable names were handed to the innocent diner by a remote sommelier were the norm. The hand of friendship, or of confidence, was rarely extended.

But, as wine has become more and more a part of everyday life in America, as people have experimented with wines at home and realized that the rules for choosing and serving wines are sensible rather than snobbish, they have learned to relax.

Restaurateurs are waking up, too. The kind of wine list that leads off with very old vintages at very high prices (there to give the list prestige but which the restaurant really does not want to sell —

once they're drunk, there goes the prestige) and gives the impression that wine is something esoteric, is gradually disappearing.

I used to eat in a little French place on Eighth Avenue called the Coq au Vin. It was — and still is, for all I know — a typical West Side bistro with simple but good food and a brief wine list.

One night I ordered one of the less popular bottles on the card. "Is this supposed to be good?" asked the young French waitress.

"It should be," I said.

"You know," she went on, "when I was a kid in Brittany [she then looked to be about 18], I thought there was just red and white wines."

Most Europeans do not grow up automatically to be wine experts. They drink the local *vin du pays* and have never concerned themselves with vintages, appellations of which way the slopes of a vineyard face.

The young girl in the Coq au Vin was no different from many of the poker-faced waiters in far more exclusive places. Wherever you are, the chances are excellent that the man or woman confronting you with the big leather book of wine names knows very little more about its contents than you do.

To some extent, brand names have simplified the ordering of wine. Mouton Cadet, Grand Marque, Blue Nun, Mateus, Almadén, Christian Brothers — they are easy to pronounce, easy to remember and, for the most part, easy to drink. Moreover, they are well-distributed in this country. The Mouton Cadet you order in Portland, Me., is also available in Portland, Ore. And it tastes the same, too.

And, as the popularity of these reasonably priced table wines has increased, restaurant owners are reshaping and rewriting their wine lists to attract people, rather than turn them off.

Windows on the World, the restaurant on the 107th floor of the World Trade Center, offers a brief selection of excellent American and European wines at the bottom of its lunch menu — among them, a 1974 chablis; the Pritchard Hill chenin blanc from Chappellet Vineyards in California; Cha-

teau de la Chaize brouilly 1976; a Wehlener Sonnenuhr from Prüm; and the Californian Ridge Lytton Springs zinfandel 1974. Prices range from \$4.50 for a good Spanish rioja to \$16 for a 1966 Chateau Gruaud-Larose from Bordeaux. At dinner, the list is longer but still not intimidating. For connoisseurs and adventurers there is a third, far more complete list.

Frog, a relatively new restaurant in Philadelphia, includes about 100 wines on its list and manages to give a brief description of each as well as a few lines on the country from which each wine comes. There is, too, a list of wine specials and wines in limited quantities. Frog's wine card is fun to read as well as to order from.

Just as picking up a drumstick or a lamb-chop bone is socially acceptable, so is ordering wine from the right-hand column. I mean by price. Decide on a price range, then look around for something in that range. Captains at the deluxe Four Seasons, when asked, will usually recommend something in the \$15 to \$18 range. But if you want to pay less, the choice is still wide.

Many restaurants now offer a separate, moderately priced list, which simplifies things immensely. Sardi's, the theater-district landmark, recently revised its wine list completely. The new card has one of the best selections of California and New York State wines in the city and includes a separate list of seven good imported bottles averaging around \$7 each.

Maxwell's Plum and the Tavern on the Green, the two extravaganzas created by Warner LeRoy, recently revised their wine lists. Gone are the pretentious old bottles at astronomical prices. Now the lists are capped with a collection of a dozen wines from France, Germany, Spain and California, the most expensive being a Sancerre for \$9.75.

Even elegant Lutèce has a separate, moderately priced list. It is tucked discreetly into the main wine book, which is proffered to each guest. Lutèce's captains, especially Jean, who commands the second floor dining room, are knowledgeable in wine matters and eager to help.

The trick, if that's the proper word, is to know your price range and to have some idea of what you want — a dry, light red, or a medium, sweet white, for example. Consult the waiter or the captain. If he has any training at all, he can tell you whether you have chosen well, or suggest something he thinks may fit your taste better. Just don't be afraid.

There is a way to avoid wine-list worries completely. It is the restaurant that offers a preselected dinner that includes the wine. In New York, on the last Thursday of every month, Le Pont Neuf on East 53d Street, features a menu of wines and food from a particular region of France. The usual cost is \$20 per person, exclusive of tips and tax. Each Saturday evening (except during July and August) Marmiton on East 49th Street has a champagne festival at which \$35 covers the cost of the meal (from a limited menu) and a bottle of French champagne. Occasionally, Le Chambertin, on West 46th Street, offers a fixed-price dinner that includes wine. It is done to move wines that are at their peak or beginning to slide, and is a good deal for the restaurant and a true bargain for its guests.

The Cellar in the Sky, a restaurant that is actually part of Windows on the World, nightly offers a full dinner, from sherry to brandy, for \$35.

A recent meal at Cellar began with Wisdom & Warter Palie Fino sherry from Spain, moved on to Freemark Abbey chardonnay 1974 from California and thence to a bordeaux, Chateau Lynch-Bages 1962. A Spanish 1970 rioja from the Marques de Cáceres was served with the cheese and one of the rarest of fine German wines — take a deep breath — a Weinheimer Sibyllenstein beerenauslese 1975, came with the orange soufflé.

Bear in mind, all this is arranged in advance, by the restaurant. This kind of meal may not tell all anyone ever wanted to know about wine but was afraid to ask, but it is certainly one of the most pleasant ways yet devised to learn more about wine without even having to cope with a wine list. It is a minicourse in wine and there is no way to flunk. ■



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