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SHOP TALK

Do you maintain a reserve list or sell wines that aren't listed?
How do you manage this process with guests?

Our program is Old World focused, in correlation with the "seven nations of Creole cuisine," and our reserve list consists of, I'd say, about 30-40 bottles that are 15 years of age or older. I've got a lot of Spanish wines, especially Priorat; Turley Zinfandel from the late 1990s; a lot of Italian wines, like Elio Altare—wines that not everybody's familiar with. They're really a hand sell.

All of our lists are on iPads, and we use a wonderful management tool, BinWise, that gives me the ability to update them on my laptop, so I'm always adding or removing wines based on our reservation notes. We glean as much guest history as we can, and then I can publish a listing I think will interest someone who might want a bottle that's not on the regular list of 1,500 wines, since in a lot of cases I have only one of them. This has helped me manage the risk of completely running out of something in the middle of service.

Often the guests who ask for off-list wines are collectors or people in the business. For instance, recently the chef from Cúrate in Asheville, N.C., came in; I knew she had worked at elBulli, so I showed her some of our hard-to-find Spanish wines. Conversations are also sparked by tableside interaction, of course. I had a gentleman from Britain come in for lunch the other day. He started with oysters, and I said, "We've got an '06 Pascal Cotat Sancerre that would be wonderful with those," which led him to ask, "What else do you have?" He was really savvy, poring over every page of the list. So I sold him the '82 Château Branaire Duluc-Ducru for his Wienerschnitzel. It was really cool; they went wonderfully together.

MOLLY WISMEIER
Director of Wine and Spirits
Restaurant R'evolution
New Orleans

A portion of our list is called "Rare and Collectible," featuring 30-35 wines that are five or 10 years old at minimum and date back to the 1970s and 1980s. With a list as large as ours—there are 645 bottles, with tasting notes for every single wine, so it's nearly 60 pages long—a lot of people just don't have the motivation to read through the whole thing; fatigue sets in. What's more, we don't approach the table unless we're asked to. So it's only when someone specifically inquires about older vintages or unique listings and triggers a conversation that I might have an opportunity to discuss those wines. Here in Southern California, if people are comfortable with you, they'll just turn the reins over. And because they've shown me some trust, those are the people I want to impress and create an experience for. Some of the wines aren't even necessarily that expensive, but they're special to me; it's not just about the first growths.

The only wines we don't list are either highly allocated or special little gems I've gone out into the

secondary market myself to acquire. There are about 100-150 of those, and I may have only one or two of each to offer people who show interest—people who've probably taken a look at the list and are asking me personally for recommendations. There has to be some sort of spark. For instance, we had a customer recently who had just come back from Napa and loved Staglin Cabernet. I said, "Do you know they make Sangiovese?" He said, "I don't think they do"; I explained that they sell it only at the winery, and I brought him some. I have no interest in buying from people I can't trust, so each one of those wines has a story behind it, and I think customers really enjoy that: Where did it come from? Why did I buy it? What's it tasting like now? And of course, they like knowing that they might be the only people in the restaurant who get to try it. But the only reason that bottle's on the table is because they asked.

JAYSON KNACK
Director of Food & Beverage
Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa
Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.

Our deep collection of 500-plus bottles is composed solely of American wines; the focus is on small-production, often single-vineyard gems, some of which can't be found anywhere else on the East Coast. We've built a loyal following of guests who really appreciate the opportunity to taste exclusive wines, so to enhance their experience, we curate a cellar list of unusual finds for which we have generally been able to secure only a bottle or two. The selection isn't printed but rather shared by word of mouth. There are approximately 20 wines on reserve, but the number can vary throughout the summer season, depending on the arrival of repeat guests who wine director Brittany Casos and I are sure will have the desire to sample them. We call them until they are ready and sometimes give our guests the option to prebuy the stock we have available. Those bottles will then be tagged so that the buyers can have them whenever they wish, without the possibility of losing one to someone else.

For example, we have a regular guest from Nashville with an extensive cellar who told us he had never been able to get his hands on a very small-production wine from Russian River Valley. We spent the winter securing three bottles of the brand; when he returned to Nantucket in the spring, we let him know that we had them in house on reserve. He enjoyed all three bottles in a 10-day period!

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This department is compiled by Assistant Editor Ruth Tobias. To post your own comments, visit the online Forum at www.sommelierjournal.com.

From top to bottom: Molly Wismeier, Jayson Knack, Orla Murphy-LaScola.

