

Is your sommelier worth his salt?

By Peter Blattmann

How do you gauge your server's "Wine Q" — and what do you do if he fails the test?

Even before having to engage a waiter or wine steward in any sort of discussion, you can gauge the integrity of the restaurant and the amount of care they have for you, the guest, by taking a quick look at the list.

A wine list is like a fingerprint, it's unique. It says a lot about the person who created it. Is the wine list easy to read and friendly, or just another attempt to intimidate? Has the restaurant put an effort into describing individual wines, organize them by taste profile and recommend any food and wine match-ups? Are there any inexpensive wines or at least a few values? Most successful restaurants concentrate on wines in the \$35 to \$80 price range, they call this the 'comfort-zone'. Do you see any wines of interest that you don't recognize, or that surprise you with their presence on the list?

Over a dozen Alberta restaurants are among the 2,800 recipient of the Wine Spectator 2004 "Award of Excellence" for their efforts to offer consumers interesting wines. They are aided by the many new products available in Alberta, more than three times the number of other provinces.

All of these clues can help you determine whether or not the restaurant has put its thought into its wine program. When it comes time for a tete a tete, if the server makes a recommendation without asking questions of you, it is almost time to throw in the towel. It is impossible for any conscientious server to recommend a wine without first ascertaining the following 'What's?':

- What will you be eating?
- What's the mood at the table? (Is it a business meal or a birthday party?)
- What does the person ordering know about wine?
- What type of wines do you like?
- What wines on this list have you enjoyed in the past?
- What would you like to spend?

You can prompt any or all of these yourself, by offering information and allowing the server to respond. If you would like to indicate a price range for example, and you prefer to discretely withhold that information from you guests, I suggest that you open the wine list to a category that you are considering and point to a wine that is comfortably within your price range, and ask for a recommendation. If your sommelier or waiter doesn't already know this method of discreet price indication, he or she should catch on quickly by pointing at or verbally suggesting another that is similarly priced. A well-trained sommelier will commonly respond by

recommending three wines, one lower, one approximately the same, and one slightly higher, thus giving you the option to choose your price point. If you have a specific wine type in mind, but would like to be informed about something new to you, or perhaps you have seen something on the list that intrigues you, again you can point it out or verbally mention what wine you have enjoyed in the past.

Alberta is very lucky to have several graduates of the sommelier guild working the wine scene and you should not hesitate to tap their expertise.

Edwin Sutherland-Ives, a sommelier at Calgary's Teatro professes that the 26 weeks of blind tastings of around 30 wines each week gave him an incredible foundation to analyze wine in-depth and therefore the expertise to offer unique, intriguing wines to his clientele. Francois Gaulin, Sommelier emphatically states that the course gave him the tools to discuss the nuances between different vintages with his well travelled, demanding customers in his 5 Diamond Banffshire Club at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel.

While some consumers are intimidated by the sommelier — some call them "cork sniffers", others accuse them of drinking their wine—your goal should be to give the sommelier enough information about what you like so that he or she can suggest wines appropriate both to the food you're having and your personal taste.

Here is the method that works for me every time — whether the list has 1,500 labels or 30 wines I've never seen before. I immediately ask for the sommelier and give him at least four wines from the list that look pretty good and are in my price range. I watch the sommelier closely as I recite my list, and watch to see which wine produces a spark in his eye. It's like interviewing; some call it dating. In almost every case, I have been turned on to some great values and been introduced to some obscure, esoteric wines.

For many diners, the wine list is an intimidating document. But don't miss out because, by using the simple strategies outlined above, the excellent cellars at some local restaurants will reveal their treasures.

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Peter Blattmann created Canada's premier wine and food event, the Fairmont Banff Springs International Wine & Food Festival, now in its 14th year. More recently Peter joined George of the Post Hotel Lake Louise to introduce their "Lake Louise Wine Summit" which has already been rated as one of the world's most prestigious wine & food events. A leading wine and food expert, Blattmann enjoys conducting gastronomic tours of renowned culinary centers and famous wine regions. More information on these pursuits can be found at www.gourmet-experience.com or call Peter at 1-888-682-9297.

