

# Listophobia

By Peter Blattmann

Associate editor "Wine & Dine" column.

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The waiter hands you the wine list. Your mind goes blank. Your guests, thinking you are engaged in silent study, anticipate a brilliant choice.

Sound familiar? Fear of the unknown is undeniable when ordering from a restaurant wine list, but there are several things you can do to make your next dining experience more enjoyable. After all, wouldn't it be nice to go to a restaurant to relax, and not to sit a gastronomic exam?

There seems to be a race on right now in Calgary to win Wine Spectator honours, The Belvedere is the only Calgary restaurant to receive that magazine's Best of Award of Excellence last year (one of 400 restaurants worldwide to receive the magazine's second-highest honour). Teatro, River Café, Catch, Wildwood, Hy's Steakhouse, Owl's Nest and La Chaumière were among the 2,800 winners of the magazine's entry-level Award of Excellence.

Restaurants are in stiff competition with each other to secure wines on an exclusive basis, and to present intriguing lists. In this last task, they are aided by the many new products available in Alberta (more than three times the number in other provinces), but the true winners are customers. With a little knowledge and a little less pride (go ahead, ask the sommelier), you should have little trouble impressing your friends.

## *STUDY UP*

Besides attending the winemaker dinners offered by more and more restaurants, consumers wanting to learn more about wines have plenty of opportunities in Calgary. Peggy Perry, having learned much about wines in France in the 1980s, saw that local consumers were thirsty for knowledge about wine. The courses she started more than 10 years ago at Willow Park Wines & Spirits have become arguably the most extensive educational program in Alberta, with up to seven events a week.

Richard Harvey learned the ropes as an educator while studying at the Académie du Vin in Paris two decades ago. His passion not only made him instrumental in launching the Canadian Sommelier Guild in Alberta but also made Metrovino—his wine boutique—the obvious choice for eccentric offerings especially from the South of France. The courses at his Calgary Wine Academy are very popular.

There are other local options as well. Murrieta's West Coast Bar & Grill features a different winery every three months, offering a chance to learn about a select group of wines in great detail. Darren Gurr at Wildwood offers nine flights (grouped tastings) of wines that let you sample three wines for between \$7 and \$10. There's more good news in the offing: later this spring, Sal Howell, proprietor of Teatro and River Café, will open a wine bar and bistro, next door to Teatro in the Dominion Bank Building. She promises an "esoteric" selection of over 30 wines-by-the-glass (priced between \$6 and \$8) that will not only be a great value but also educational.

### *THE CHAIN GANG*

Now, it's more than likely your next confrontation with a wine list will come before you complete your education. Calgary is very lucky to have several graduates of the Sommelier Guild working the wine scene, and you should not hesitate to tap their expertise. Both Sal Howell and David Partridge, restaurant general manager at Catch, are graduates of the program. They say that 26 weeks of blind-tasting around 30 wines each week gave them an incredible foundation for analyzing wine in-depth.

Edwin Sutherland-Ives, a sommelier at Teatro, graduated from the guild in 1999. He uses his knowledge to teach Teatro's staff—he calls them "the wine rangers"—about wines from around the world, specifically those on the restaurant's 750-label list. For Howell, investing in Sutherland-Ives' training was one of her smartest moves. His expertise is invaluable to customers, and he has attracted several other sommeliers to Teatro.

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.

To size up a customer, Sutherland-Ives usually asks which wines they are interested in—the answer will indicate how much they intend to spend. Money, he says, is an awkward subject—in fact, wine is probably one of the few things that people feel insecure talking about in a public setting.

Sommeliers will never talk about prices unless the customer does so first, which, in cases where somebody is being entertained, almost never happens. On any given night, about half the patrons request his help. Sutherland-Ives notes that many of those who refuse his help expect him to congratulate them on their brilliant choice.

### *ON YOUR OWN*

Restaurants that do not have the luxury of a sommelier have to focus on producing an intriguing wine list that is easily understood. When it comes to the format of the wine list, I believe that many restaurants would be wise to take advice from a somewhat unlikely competitor: Earl's and its chain of sister restaurants, Joey Tomato's Mediterranean Grill. This chain has, in my opinion, the cleverest and most consumer-friendly wine list, and it is specially suited for wine neophytes.

The list takes a new approach, grouping wines by structure rather than by region or variety. Wines are listed by their taste-profile, progressing from milder- to stronger-tasting wines. This allows customers (perhaps with some help from a server) to find a wine that meets their desires. Organizing wines by their taste-profiles results in less intimidation and confusion. Sales have skyrocketed, says Jeff Boyd, director of

bar development for Joey Tomato's Mediterranean Grill, which recently implemented parts of Earl's wine program.

With only 60 wines, its list is not the most extensive, but Earl's offers 40 wines by the glass, generating a whopping 65 per cent of total wine sales—more than any restaurant I know. By capping its markup for any bottle at \$ 14 and pouring a bigger glass (seven ounces) for \$ 6 to \$ 8, it offers outstanding value.

George Piper, director of purchasing at Earl's attributes the program's success to an annual selection process that includes surveying wine writers and quizzing customers about what wines they prefer.

#### *TRICKS OF THE TRADE*

When presented with a wine list, it might also help to know something about its underlying logic. According to Darren Gurr, general manager of Creative Restaurants Inc. (in charge of Wildwood, Bonterra and Catch), any wine list is affected by several factors, including the passions of those creating the list, the budget of the owners, the availability of wines, the customer base, the restaurant's cuisine, and the different price points it wants to offer. With any luck, the result is a document that will entice wine-knowledgeable diners while not intimidating someone who just wants to order a pleasant \$30 bottle for dinner, Gurr says.

At its best, the soul of a wine list reflects the sensibility, resourcefulness and creativity of the person behind it, claims Sal Howell, proprietor of River Café and Teatro. Both Howell and Gurr should know; both manage wine lists of various sizes offering wines from a Chenin Blanc from South Africa for \$26 at Catch to a 1990 Château Petrus for \$2,500 at Teatro.

While the upper-end prices are eye-catching (to say nothing of jaw-dropping), it is the comfort-zone wines—those priced between \$40 and \$90—that are the main focus of wine lists. According to Cam MacCorquodale, general manager at Murrieta's, increasingly knowledgeable customers who demand better value largely drive this trend.

The same phenomenon has played out at Catch, which has lowered the price of some of its higher-end wines. According to restaurant general manager David Partridge, those reductions, coupled with the decision to introduce customers to more obscure wines by the glass in the \$7 to \$13 range (instead of the \$9 to \$40 range offered when the restaurant opened two years ago), increased wine sales substantially.

There is change afoot at other restaurants as well. Murrieta's only offers wines from the west coast of North and South America plus the Pacific Rim. At Wildwood, Gurr plans to offer only Canadian wines (primarily from the Okanagan) to complement the restaurant's Rocky Mountain cuisine. The River Café, known for using almost entirely organically grown produce, will, within two years, feature a list offering exclusively organic wines, according to Howell.

To these proprietor-driven changes, can be added more general trends. Calgary restaurants continue to witness a steady shift towards red wine consumption—in some cases accounting for 70 per cent of total wine sales. All the restaurateurs agree that maintaining a wine list represents a continuous challenge: giving customers what they want while persuading them to want what the restaurant has to give. It's

a precarious balance forever in flux, which just goes to show that although a wine list may be printed on paper, it's definitely not written in stone.