

## Secrets of The Winelist

One half is intrigue, influence, bluff, bias, coercion, bribery and greed; the other is timing, diplomacy, allegiance, alliance, luck, persistence, imagination and vision. Are we describing preselection for a political party or the story behind the construction of your average winelist? Take your pick. Few winelists are merely slapped together and there is probably no such thing as an 'average' one. Most winelists are some combination of those descriptors above; and each restaurant exercises a greater or lesser degree of control over the final product. Ultimately most winelists probably reflect the hospitality philosophies of the outlet; something between "there it is, help yourself" and total service, full interaction from the time you as a customer appear at the restaurant door.

Depending on the outlet, the news that they are doing their list can create quite a buzz, and it generates rivalries, intrigue and even temporary alliances amongst the wholesale wine distributors and their reps who hope to supply them. This is their opportunity to secure listings. These may or may not result in many sales, but listings do tend to remain in place for at least weeks and in some cases months or longer.

The restaurant wants a manageable and relevant wine selection to offer its customers. The wine companies want in, to either take the list away to 'adjust' and do the printing - with enough wines on to justify the cost - or to secure multiple or strategic listings. They're armed with a mix of prior relationship, charm, coercion and bribes. Some offer professional guidance - showing a partner's concern for what is best for the restaurant - and see their role as 'eyes and ears' to help get the right mix. The active winelist manager picks and chooses who they accept advice and financial assistance from. This custodian hands the list over with clear guidelines about how many and which wines the rep is allowed to put on - or risks a poorly balanced selection where the rep has simply put too many of their wines on, snuck in their duds or given opposition wines the flick. These lists seldom show balance, range or imagination. The provider cares little if the wines match the food style, or for stock and finance implications. There's rarely a long-term relationship to blossom out of this.

But with partnership a winelist should emerge which has a purpose, structure and a vision. One model is small and constantly changing and features a mix of the recognizable and moderately priced, the large and the small producers and the mainstream and the cutting edge of wine varieties and styles. It's mainly domestic wines from all over the country,

and features regional specialties. This is complemented by one or two imports, which particularly suit the food, or provides something not made locally, or is just an indulgent or adventurous option.

A small and balanced selection of sparkling wines kick things off and includes two local choices at different price levels, an authentic sparkling red and a Champagne or a serious domestic version of it.

The whites progress from the lighter, fresher and more aromatic, Rieslings, Chenin Blanc, Verdelho and Colombard through the weightier aromatics of Sauvignon Blanc, Gewurztraminer and Viognier. There might be a couple of versions of a regional speciality, eg SA Riesling. Blends like Semillon and Sauvignon form a link to the less aromatic and more textured and weightier wines, Semillon, Pinot Gris (Pinot Grigio) and Chardonnay. Perhaps an import here, especially if the type of customer encourages it or the food suggests it. If the dishes are typically lighter, fresher, crunchier and more aromatic eg Thai or fish-caf, the emphasis will be on those zippier aromatics. If food styles are richer, more textured, complex and long-cooked, the weightier wines get a bigger share. A medium sweet and a dessert wine round out the whites. About four wines by the glass is appropriate.

Likewise for the reds; rose and lighter bodied reds lead off, though the varieties and styles which feature elegance, structure and liveliness or clear and generous fruitiness, like Pinot Noir, the emerging Italian varieties, such as Sangiovese and Barbera, the Spanish Tempranillo or the revitalised Grenache. Then Shiraz, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon; first the more elegant models, lighter in ripeness and oak, then the blends, followed by the bigger beasties.

If the list can explain this weight progression, without being too wordy or condescending and offers perhaps just three or four words to each wine, this will help the customer to match up wines and food by a simple (and admittedly very general) weight and color compatibility. It's a start – and is it too much to expect?