

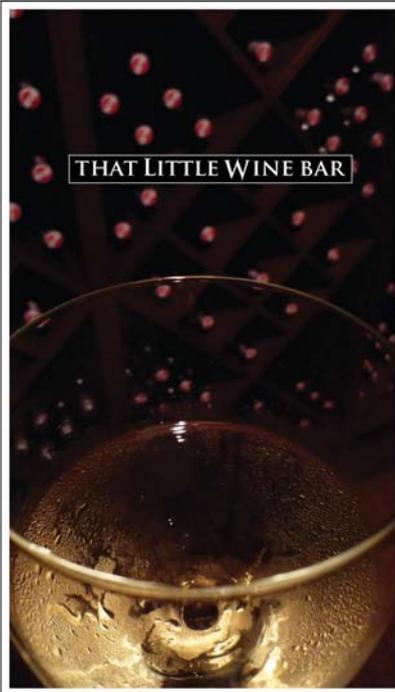
THAT LITTLE WINE BAR

James The Sommelier – Service

‘Wine honors the soul, so honor it with yours.’

Service – on being a sommelier

With the New Year brings, for the most part, new beginnings. Resuming the wine bar newsletter, I struggled to decide what inspiration for the first article of 2013 I could draw from. Having scoured my previous writings, I realized that nothing really sprang out as immediately obvious, other than topics already covered. So, I decided to start a series based on the experiences of a Sommelier. There will always be other, possibly, more serious points to explore in the wine world but these ‘Service’ pieces will shed a little light on the knowledge needed and gained while working in the wine industry. And, as always, hopefully make for a good read.



This idea is inspired by Michelle Roux and the BBC’s “Service,” a reality T.V. show in which eight underprivileged and privileged teenagers, unsure of their specific direction in life, are inducted into the world of hospitality. Fine dining, sommelier service, table-side preparation, private catering and hotel service all feature in the tests designed to highlight those two worthy, in the end, of a scholarship with Michelle Roux and, finally, a position at his restaurant. It would be unfair to leave out Anthony Bourdin, author of ‘Kitchen Confidential,’ and the Waiter, an anonymous blogger and author of ‘Waiters Rant,’ because their mission was the same - to enlighten the world as to what really goes on behind closed doors in the hospitality business.

But Roux’s “Service” explores in more detail the learning, teaching and knowledge behind the business, so much so that his T.V. series retails for extortionate sums due to its appeal as educational entertainment. And with that, I start to imagine the life of a Sommelier in a new light – as a person designed to sell through educational entertainment.

The bottom line is that most of a Sommelier’s work is behind closed doors. Wine parings, stock taking, cellar management, menu design, wine ordering all depend on a Sommelier with drive and an in-depth knowledge of the wines he or she will be serving. In particular, research into wine is integral in keeping up to date with certain styles, fashions and concerns about wine. Not many women (and metrosexual men, come to think of it) would wear clothes out of date and certainly would not shop in a store dominated with out-dated designs; the wine world is the same with fashions in chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, rose, malbec and even spirits like vermouth all creating buzz, intrigue but most importantly expectation. If a Sommelier cannot serve what is expected by customers, than the battle is half lost. Most importantly, however, he must act as a teacher, being able to instruct the staff in the correct way to serve wine, how to read the customers and anticipate their wants and needs culminating in a perfect wine suggestion.

The real show, however, is during service. The Sommelier begins a routine stage act which is both automotive through repetition and yet also instinctive, relying on sharp presence of mind to guide customers through their meal with as much ease – and entertainment! – as possible. The entertainment is not floosy - Sommeliers don’t often find themselves in places like the local brothel, for example – and neither can it be stiff; nothing forced. Without feeling relaxed themselves the Sommelier cannot expect relaxed customers and negotiating a prickly minefield of judgment from a word spoken out of turn causing a kink of annoyance in a customer’s chain-mail of expectation makes for a difficult night indeed. So it needs to be perfect.

The entertainment, then, needs to be eerily wine specific, concentrating on neutral ground. There are few with the skill to juggle bottles or make a cork disappear, so the entertainment comes from interesting and funny anecdotes, personalizing certain wines and even reaching agreements on certain blends of wine, their grapes or countries from which it is grown. I usually use the French for the butt of my jokes but only for irony that ensues... of course.

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