

Michael Fridjhon in Business Day – 18 July 2014

In an ideal world, there would be no reason for restaurateurs to employ sommeliers. The wine list selection at quality dining establishments would be broad and transparent, making wine choice as easy as selecting your meal. Doubts about the suitability of a particular item could be disposed of by way of a tasting from stocks kept open for wine sales by the glass. In this utopia, all restaurants would list a broad and representative range of quality wines. Everyone, from the proprietors of these extraordinary establishments to even the most occasional customers would share comparable levels of product wisdom. After all, we know that *Tournadoes Rossini* are filet steaks served with a slab of foie gras - how hard is it to have a class of diners who can instantly envisage the taste and texture of any one of five thousand bottles of wine?

Except we know this is absurd. There are vastly more wines available for sale than even the most assiduous wine buff can hope to commit to memory, just as there are more ways of serving beef than the so-called classical cuisine options that dominated fine dining establishment menus until the 1980s. The success of “cutting edge” restaurants is the originality of what they offer. This unpredictability is one of the many features which distinguish them from steak-houses and family diners. If you expect the waiter who takes your order to know everything about the dishes on the menu, how they are prepared, what goes into them, how they look, taste and feel, why should you not want the person serving the wine to be able to engage on a similar plane?

You expect the chef to source the best possible ingredients, obtaining beef from one farmer, lamb from another, butter and dairy products from a third, potatoes from Ile de Re, cured ham from a long-established producer in San Daniele and truffles from Perigord. It's not unreasonable to anticipate the same commitment to quality in the wine selection, how the bottles are stored and, as importantly, how they are served.

Except that we don't. We look at wine lists which have clearly been put together by the representative of one of several wine distributors, where 80% of the items come from a single wholesaler's stock, and uncomplainingly accept that this is the way of the world. (If you go to a chain of so-called family diners - a Steers or Ocean Basket kind of establishment - there probably won't even be an attempt to conceal the fact that only one supplier has been involved in sourcing the wines.) In an age of desk-top publishing we patiently live with the absence of vintage information, with the perennial out-of-stocks, with the sheepishly announced product substitutions.

We accept the “cost-of-wine-service” myth and tolerate the 150% - 250% mark-ups when the “wine waiter” wrestles with the closure, thumbing the lip of the bottle as he or she battles to remove the capsule, and then looks at us blankly when we taste the clumsily poured sample and pronounce the wine “corked.” We raise no objection to the tot-sized 'Paris' goblets or the Irish coffee glasses into which these service industry professionals pour the R100 bottles which the establishment sells for R295. No wonder there's no real impetus for change at the level of management.

Happily there are wine enthusiasts who want to become sommeliers, organisations which are available to train them, international producers like Champagne Bollinger willing to sponsor competitions between them and a few enlightened proprietors who have worked out that correctly used, sommeliers can bring in more than enough additional revenue to justify their employment. Increasingly it is clear that the bottle-neck is consumers themselves. There are more sommeliers in the Western Cape - with its international

tourism industry - than in Gauteng. In Johannesburg we are simply too passive and pusillanimous - we'd rather not make a fuss. We get the wine service we deserve.