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The Best Wine Lists In America Competition

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It's no easy chore wading through hundreds of wine lists to determine which ones have the right stuff. But the folks at the Beverage Testing Institute have done just that. So, without further ado, here are the results of the 18th annual Best Wine Lists in America Competition. Check them out . . . you just might learn something.

Evaluating Your Wine List

When you judge a wine list competition, you start to realize that reading a wine list is a very interesting exercise, especially when you're not choosing a wine. Like other sales tools in your arsenal— business cards, brochures, websites, ads, and especially your food menu—your wine list can communicate a lot about your restaurant. On the surface, it can reinforce your concept and theme: casual, formal, exotic or ethnic. But more subtly, and importantly, it can reveal what you think of your customers and what kind of relationship you want to have with them.

Take a minute or two and look at your wine list. What do you see: a simple list of wines, vintages, prices, and maybe appellations under regional headings? If so, your list is like the majority of wine lists we saw in this year's competition. Nothing wrong with it, on the surface. But now look at your wine list as a sales tool and compare it to your most visible and vital sales tool, your menu. Would you list your menu items without giving some information about the ingredients, sauces, herbs, or method of preparation for your dishes? Probably not. Then why don't you give your customers the same level of detail about your wines?

You might say that the brand names, vintages, etc. are the details, or that you prefer your well-trained staff to explain the details of your wines to your customers and make recommendations—a more personal touch. Fine, but every successful salesperson needs a strong sales tool. Why not give your salespeople the best tool possible, a tool that will prime your customers for a sale by engaging, guiding, and empowering them? For most people, wine is a confusing subject. Why not be the restaurant that makes wine easier and more fun for these customers and elevates their understanding to the point that they are excited to make their own choices and use your staff's recommendations to fine tune their own choices, instead of reflexively relying on your staff as a crutch?

People like to explore and learn new things—it's human nature and it makes them feel good. If you give your patrons the tools to learn about interesting wines, they are more likely to buy them. The "personal touch" should start with your list and set the stage for your salespeople to shine.

Sounds good, but how do you create a wine sales tool that engages, guides, and empowers your customers? First, stop thinking about your wine *list* and start thinking about your wine *menu*. Second, keep reading.

Who is Your Wine Customer?

A good salesperson doesn't craft a sales piece and just throw it out there. Yet most restaurateurs are so focused on wine inventory, pricing, and availability issues that they do just that and sometimes forget to look at the big picture of what's going on with their potential wine customer base. So let's take a look at some recent wine "macro-facts" and see how they might affect the microcosm of your market and help you improve your wine menu.

The news is good. According to a recent study conducted by the Merrill Research firm, table wine consumption last year increased for the twelfth year in a row, 3.3% over 2005 numbers, with the trend showing no signs of slowing down.

But, what specifically is going on with your potential customers and who are they?



SOPHISTICATION: The interior of Truffles invites customers to relax and enjoy wine.



THE MAN: John Cain, G.M. of Truffles Restaurant.

- An estimated 70 million Americans are "Millennials" (ages 13 to 30), and the legal drinkers of this group display a stronger interest in wine than any other part of the population.
- Roughly 70% of wine purchased in America was domestic, down from 77% in 2003. Imports are on the rise.
- Wine type or varietal is the most significant factor in wine purchasing, followed by price, brand, origin, vintage and packaging.
- For wine drinkers in the U.S., 50% consume at least one glass of wine per week ("core" wine drinkers) and 50% consume at least one glass of wine every three months ("marginal" wine drinkers).
- Core wine drinkers purchase 92% of the wine bought in America. Marginal drinkers only buy 8%.
- The majority of core wine drinkers are men. Most marginal wine drinkers are women.
- In 2006, 70% of wine consumed in the US was retail priced between \$6 and \$15.
- And lastly, 30% of all wine consumed is in restaurants or bars and 41% of on-premise sales are by-the-glass.



HOLDING COURT: Glenn Bardgett, wine director for Annie Gunn's (far right) laughs it up with the boys during a raucous good time at the restaurant.

Studies sometimes provide data that can be interpreted in multiple ways and it's easy to get lost on a trail of conclusions that don't match your given situation when looking at these facts. However, the basic, positive trends of increased overall wine consumption, increased interest in wine among the younger generation, and the buying patterns and character of the core wine drinkers are important to note when you are crafting your wine menu. You want to make sure that your menu is going to address the needs, habits, and style of a younger, less-experienced wine consumer who really enjoys wine. likes to explore reasonably priced imported wines, and discovers interesting wines by the glass.

This Year, the Heartland Rules

First off, let me say that we have no axe to grind with restaurants on the coasts or their wine menus! We love them and treasure the incredible talent that they bring to the table, obviously. After our evaluation, we were surprised to find that most of this year's winners were from America's heartland. But then, this is another indication of just how well distributed food industry talent is throughout the country and how lucky we are to be living in a time of so much creativity, opportunity, and rewards in every market. Okay, back to the run down.

International Winner: Truffles

The next time you are in St. Louis, make sure to stop in at Truffles and, at the very least, check out their wine menu. It is a wonderful, traditionally styled menu that presents an impressive assortment of classic and "other exciting wines from here and there" by region and appellation in order by price. Concise, easy to read and understand, it is a model of how to present a deep international cellar in a way that impresses as much as it inspires.

The menu starts off with a by-the-glass section that includes some very personable and appealing tastings notes. It's surprising how many by-the-glass menus present these wines without some kind of tasting note or pairing idea. Would you omit ingredient details from your daily special menus? Why would you omit the same kind of tantalizing and mouthwatering details from your by-the-glass menu, especially when a potential 41% (or more) of your wine sales could be by-the-glass.

Next, one is treated to a special section on a theme that was a critical factor for our judges: value. A tasty 20 wines for \$25 each is the pitch here, and it's a great one. Most of your customers are looking for wines under \$15. They once boasted about buying expensive wines, they are now clearly interested in value wines. Why make them hunt and peck through your list to find wines? Give them a place to start looking after they've had a glass of wine and they want to order a bottle of something not too pricy. And notice, I said value wine, not cheap wine or distributor specials that every other restaurant has. Truffles' \$25 wines are eclectic wines whose names jump off the page as interesting wines in the first place; the \$25 price tag seals the deal. I'm sure that the solid by-the-glass and value wine sections are strong factors contributing to Truffles' impressive and steadily increasing 27% wine sales of total F&B sales ratio.

What follows these appetizers is a tour-de-force presentation of the great wine regions of the world with classic, cult, and little-known producers littered throughout, often with great verticals and horizontals of great vintages and vineyards at superb prices. Again, these are broken down by region and sub-region with exciting varietal alternatives for the domestic regions. All the wines are organized roughly by price, making this an easy and rewarding wine voyage to navigate. In short, you won't have to dig hard to find Truffles' treasures.

U.S. Winner: Annie Gunn's

Tucked away in the western suburbs of St. Louis we find a stalwart of our annual wine competition that has come in second place for the last two years and now takes its well-deserved bow in the spotlight. This year's only recipient of perfect marks in every category, Annie Gunn's wine menu is truly an intoxicatingly fun presentation of a masterful selection of some of America's (and the world's) greatest wines—all at very, very



WIN SHORT: Ricardo's Italian Cafe in St. Louis offers a short, but smart and exciting, wine list.



NICE CHOICE: Ricardo's owner Michelle Adams knows her wine.

reasonable prices.

This menu has a great assortment of wines by the glass, organized in their spin on progressive wine categories: "crisp, fresh, and flavorful, dry wines to make Chef Lou's food sing," or "Chardonnays of complexity and depth," (and in their bottle listings too: "Napa Valley Meritage for our great dry-aged steaks.") We were astonished to see how many other wine menus did not use the simple and effect concepts of the "progressive wine list" (light-to-heavy; dry-to-fruity) to help guide their patrons' choices. With Millennial drinkers coming online in droves, thirsty for new wines to try and experimenting with different cuisines and food pairings, does it make sense to move away from a menu format that greatly simplifies the wine ordering and food matching process? The folks at Annie Gunn's don't think so and neither do we.

Although this is a fabulous presentation of America's top wines—often in dizzyingly deep verticals—more remarkably, I think, every wine listed has an engaging, originally written tasting note or description. As a writer of such notes I can tell you this is not an easy task, but it is well worth the effort since at every turn of the page the customer is given a very personal voice guiding and suggesting (and even cracking jokes) to them to try something that was obviously a joy to discover. And this is Annie Gunn's menu's greatest strength: it was not written by a committee, a computer program, or copied from someone else's formula. It was written by a person (or gestalt-like group of wine aficionados) who love wine and food combinations and isn't afraid to wear passion on their sleeve in the reams of the wine menu. It's a far too uncommon phenomenon, which is too bad because passion is infectious and who wouldn't want a customer passionate about their dining experience?

Short List Winner: Ricardo's Italian Cafe

I've always felt that a great short wine menu is the most challenging kind to create. This impression is corroborated by the amount of similar-looking lists that we receive each year. These are lists written without a lot of care or concern about anything other than pricing, eye-catching big brand name presence, and which supplier or distributor is paying for the menu printing. And, since the majority of wine lists in America are short ones, this can be a real turn-off for both us and more unfortunately, a lot of potential wine customers who are looking for something different, need guidance, and are drinking more and better wine.

So it really brightens our day to see a tidy little menu like the one proffered by Ricardo's Italian Cafe. Not big on frills or extras, this clear, easy-to-read wine menu caught our eye because it truly excels in fair pricing and off-the-beaten-path diversity. And in the lean, mean arena of small inventory, on-premise wine sales, this is an agile and effective one-two punch. Their philosophy is, "Drink what you like, never feel intimidated and never let anyone tell you that you are drinking the wrong wine," and it shows in the carefully chosen and sensationally food-friendly wine choices that they have made. These wines are all winners and they're all about going with the food, not the crowd. Ricardo's philosophy is an ideal state for every wine customer to be in, and is well worth preaching through your wine list, too.

So consider these facts, techniques and observations the next time you look at, or work on, your wine list. Remember, at the end of the day, your wine list should be a wine menu—an expressive, well-thought-out and emotionally inspiring sales tool that says who you are and makes your customer's job of buying your wine an easier, more interesting, and truly fun experience that they will want to experience with you again and again.

How We Judge Wine Lists

The Beverage Testing Institute (B.T.I.), which has been producing fair and impartial wine reviews for consumers

since 1981, sorted the entries by size and category. All were screened to remove the lists that did not meet a few basic entry standards. The remaining entries were then individually reviewed by Jerald O'Kennard, director of BTI, and his team, which then awarded points for seven criteria:

* Overall Wine Selection – We were looking for lists that chose the best examples in any given style and price point. We wanted to see a thoughtful selection of quality wines and not a wine list driven by price point and category decisions. More basically, we asked are these good wines?

* Variety in Style and Brands – We were looking for diverse lists with a wide selection of styles, producers and regions. (Some restaurants have a large selection of wines– but from one or two mega-producers and their families of imported wines. Sweetheart deals with one or two suppliers are not in the interests of the consumer.)

* Fair Pricing and Value Options – We looked at each list to see if the pricing was fair for the consumer, with reasonable markups taken. (We took into consideration the higher prices and excessive taxes that restaurants face in some states.) We also looked at each list to see if there were inexpensive but decent alternatives for price-conscious diners.

* Compatibility with the Menu – A wine list with a focus on First Growth Bordeaux can be awe-inspiring, but it is strangely out of place in a fish house. No matter how large the wine list, each and every wine should be chosen because it complements the restaurant's food, and for no other reason. Entries that didn't include a menu (as requested on the entry application) weren't eliminated, but no points could be awarded for menu compatibility.



* Presentation – Your wine list speaks for your restaurant. Make sure that it is neat, well-organized, readable, and dare we say, stylish.

* Extras – Wines from unique regions, availability of half bottles, appealing by-the-glass and value-oriented sections, tasting notes, and descriptions, and other well-thought-out extras were noted and awarded points.

* Overall Impression – A good wine list should encourage patrons to explore new wines and step up to better ones. It should be interesting and even exciting to read. Ultimately we were looking for creativity and imagination. A boring, "laundrylist" wine list isn't a great wine list.

After this initial stage, both B.T.I. and a select panel of restaurant and wine professionals reviewed the top quarter of entries. From these reviews we selected the winners in this year's Best Wine Lists in America competition.

Every restaurant that submitted a list should be congratulated for working to raise the standards for restaurant wine service.

THE WINNERS

International Wine List Category Winners

1st Place: Truffles Restaurant, La Due, MO

2nd Place: Italian Village, Chicago, IL

3rd Place: Vaccaro's Trattoria, Akron, OH

U.S. Wine List Category Winners

1st Place: Annie Gunn's, Chesterfield, MO

2nd Place: Lark Creek Steak, San Francisco, CA

3rd Place: Smith & Wollensky, Columbus, OH

Short List Category Winners

1st Place: Ricardo's Italian Café, St. Louis, MO

2nd Place: Babette's, Atlanta, GA

3rd Place: Beachhouse, Decatur, IL

Honorable Mention

International:

Jay's Restaurant, Dayton, OH

Café and Bar Lucrat, Minneapolis, MN

Vue Restaurant, Hudson, OH

U.S.:

Spencer's for Steaks, Spokane, WA

Pierpont's at Union Station, Kansas City, MO

Big Rock Chophouse, Birmingham, MI

