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On the twin malaise affecting restaurant wine lists that don't inspire, but are humdrum and overpriced

## Wine Lists – the Bold and the Boring

**A wine list should spark a sense of happy anticipation. Wine lists that feature low-priced crowd-pleasing quaffs do great disservice to the clientele**

I enjoy reading articles on wine that not just inform, but stimulate thought and debate. It is for this reason that Tim Atkin MW's eponymous website (among a few others) is one that I enjoy. His contributors and writers often offer thought-provoking commentary on many wine topics du jour.

One that caught my attention recently was by Andy Neather titled, "Offensively Inoffensive". Inspired by a particularly invigorating #winetwitter debate on Gordon Ramsay's Michelin-starred London restaurant Pétrus, it focused on what he called the restaurant's "punchy prices" (or gasp-inducing markups). Not only was a 125ml glass of Pétrus 2003 priced at a mind-boggling £1,150, but the (even lower) blow was for the bottom end of the wine list where a 125ml glass of Timorasso priced at £20 in retail, was priced at £14 – a 400% markup.

A massive restaurant markup is something many wine lovers are already familiar with. What I found even more interesting was Neather's comment that not only was the Pétrus wine list overpriced but, shockingly, it was something worse – boring.

This is possibly the worst sin a restaurateur

can inflict on his clientele. Even if a wine list is a brief one of just 20 wines, it should spark a sense of happy anticipation. Wine lists that feature low-priced crowd-pleasing quaffs or wines sourced on profitable BOGOF (by one, get one free) deals do great disservice to the clientele. They offer nothing better than the humdrum.

While I have nothing against generic crowd-pleasing wines, I do wish the restaurant trade, especially those with a wine-savvy clientele or the ability to keep a larger inventory, would get a little more adventurous. Who wouldn't like to try a greater diversity of offerings – wines made of native Greek or Sicilian grapes; biodynamic Cabernet Sauvignons from Margaret River, Rhône Valley gems or wines by South Africa's many innovative producers? Offering something new and delicious (at less drastic markups) is a sure-fire way to spark interest in wine drinkers.

In short, the ho-hum feeling that often hits me when I look at a restaurant wine list is a major enthusiasm dampener, as I am sure it might be for others. I often pick the least 'offensively inoffensive' option and get on with my evening.

This is in complete contrast to occasions when I travel. On a visit to London, for instance, I eagerly look forward to a meal at Noble Rot, a restaurant and wine bar beloved of many wine lovers. Now with a second outpost in Soho, which reduces its long waiting list for tables, the wine-focused restaurant has a policy of continually scouting out new and exciting wines – it has a constantly changing list of 40 wines by the glass and several by Coravin. Several top-rated wines are available at a sweet spot of £40-50 per bottle and many are priced much lower – each unusual and special. Here is where I first tasted a wine that is now a firm favourite with me – a Xinomavro from Naoussa by boutique producer Domaine Dalamara. Even better, their wines by the glass start at £5.

Neather goes on to quote the head sommelier of Noble Rot as saying that a decent wine-by-the-glass and carafe selection helps greatly to introduce customers to new styles and regions. Noble Rot founder Mark Andrew has claimed that wine drinkers have become more adventurous since the lockdown which is why his list is loaded with discoverable beauties including wines from Tenerife, Greece, Hungary and South Africa.

Another paradise for wine lovers is 67 Pall Mall. Grant Ashton's private members club in London (now also opened in Singapore, Switzerland and soon in Burgundy) makes 6,000 wines available by the bottle and 800 by the glass. You can spend many an indulgent evening tasting their carefully-sourced wines from 42 different regions and go home satiated, yet without your wallet ravaged.

In Covent Garden's Ten Cases bistro and wine bar, the name spells out the philosophy – they buy just 10 cases of a wine at a time, offering regular customers a variety of producers, vintages and grapes to try. This makes every visit a voyage of discovery. There are many more such happy instances in New



Noble Rot restaurant and wine bar in London has an adventurous outlook on wines with a wine list that is full of surprises

York, Paris, Sydney and more.

I can think of very few restaurants at home which spark this level of interest. Even those with excellent and innovative food menus fall into the ho-hum zone when it comes to wine lists. While I agree with Peter McCombie MW in the same piece when he says customers need to feel 'comfortable', I am happy that he also goes on to add, 'enthusiasm sells'.

I am sure my importer and restaurateur friends will offer a thousand reasons why India lags behind in the 'enthusiasm' stakes. Many of these reasons would be valid. But there is no good excuse for not affording young drinkers a well-priced wine by the glass, Indian or imported, to ensure they return for another. Recently, a small step in the right direction comes from a handful of restaurant brands that have tied up with Indian wine producers to create house wines – offering better choices and prices for the consumers.

This just might tempt them to try something a little different yet delicious. And allow them to fall in love with the complexity and beauty that is wine. v

**Grant Ashton's private members club '67 Pall Mall' in London makes 6,000 wines available by the bottle and 800 by the glass**