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A-Lists

Great wine lists aren't about size; sometimes haiku matters.

By Francis Fecteau

Size doesn't matter. Not with wine lists. All a great wine list need do is rouse my curiosity and encourage my thirst. But, just as with Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who couldn't define what constituted obscenity (but he knew it when he saw it), it's about as difficult to define what makes a "great" restaurant wine list. A great wine list is most assuredly in the eye of the beholder.



My own rules of thumb for a great wine list are simple. It's a good start if I find one thing I want to drink; it's a great start if I find a dozen. Granted, it's a personal yardstick, but it hasn't failed me yet. There are a million and one train wrecks in the big city—wine lists that read like afterthoughts or as exercises of ego (you know this one) from an eager, indecisive restaurateur who wants a little bit of everything and, more often than not, ends up with a whole lot of nothing. Oh, the number of times I've settled for the least offensive wine that sprang to my attention. And lately, more often than not, this happens out of town. Thankfully, I travel "well-armed," so to speak.

That said, let me share this revelation: Salt Lake City is a great food-and-wine town by any standard, peopled by passionate and caring wine geeks of all stripe and color. Creating a great wine list takes focus, a passionate curiosity, and a little patience. And Utah has an abundance of marvelous, everyday, accessible, rightunder-your-nose, examples.

Yes, there are great "encyclopedic" wine lists, where it's always a pleasure to see "the notebook." Spencer's for Steaks and Chops' list is a model of focus and depth with an exhaustive range of interesting by-the-glass selections. Good thing, too, because I practically need a glass of wine to keep me occupied while I leisurely work my way through it. Wine director Louis Koppel achieves terrific depth in classic regions like Bordeaux, Burgundy and Napa, while offering substantial values from developing wine regions of the world.

A great wine list also needs a great staff, and there are restaurateurs who deserve special kudos for keeping their staff engaged, interested and capable of discussing wine at a variety of levels. All too often, waiters plead ignorance or sound as though they are reciting a script. Karen Olsen of Metropolitan maintains a savvy and well-educated staff, a terrific range of wines on an exhaustive list, a "staff's picks" page and other features that make for an interesting wine experience.

Eric Debonis of The Paris Bistro also deserves a commendation. The Paris' global approach encompasses Debonis' polyglot palate with a particular focus on food-friendly European classics. There are many affordable values, and the uber-professional staff is always happy to offer direction and thoughtful commentary.

A great small list can be the equivalent of fine haiku; carefully chosen wines speak volumes and such lists dot our fair city with ever increasing frequency. Caffe Niche is wine list haiku at its best: 10 wines, all great values, evenly priced. Downtown stalwart Caffe Molise offers nearly 20 wines by-the-glass of 40 selections or so over all, and all well paired for Italian cuisine. Ski town fixture Shallow Shaft offers a depth of experience, old vintages, new vintages and values that always fascinate simpleton to wine-dork alike. Newcomer Wild Grape is shuffling new flavors around via its by-the-flight offerings, with no end of enthusiastic explanations for the fledgling wine dork. I am sure there are more, and I could go on, but I can only drink so much.

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