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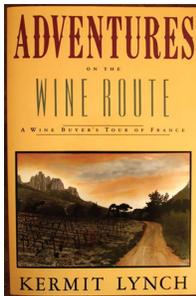
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Reading Wine Lists & Labels

How to read wine lists and labels, and getting to know your importers.

By Francis Fecteau

The average consumer takes 60 seconds with a restaurant wine list before making a selection. This particular statistic speaks volumes. It means that we reach for what is familiar, that we are intimidated by the unfamiliar and that we don't want to think too much when confronted with a wine list. Tsk, tsk: shame on us. We miss compelling wines that way. As a wine broker, I find it a reprehensible habit and suggest taking a chance on something you can't pronounce, or walking down the strange aisles of the wine store where, usually, you never dare tread.

Thanks to the derring-do of a hearty group of wine-savvy restaurant professionals in Salt Lake City (and Park City), wine lists are improving all over, splattered with exciting, palate-tingling selections from near and far. One way or the other, Salt Lake City is turning into a great food and wine city. Judging from the number of restaurateurs now offering flights, splashes and other wine-centered options and events at more reasonable prices than ever, these knowledgeable wine nerds want to make it easy for you.

My yearly travel confirms that truly great or even thoughtful wine lists are few and far between. The few great ones are usually found at the most luxe establishments, and most are dictated by what the wine distributor is being bonused on or what free case goods were made available that week. Of course, Utah restaurateurs have to work a little harder—no freebies, no price breaks, no swag. They have to pay full retail prices for wine, so they work harder here, learn more and search out deals and perceived deals from all over the world. They are looking for the proverbial "bang for the buck," so you don't have to. (Encourage their efforts by drinking out of your comfort zone; they deserve your support.)

Some of that intimidation stems from the arcana printed on wine labels. It's unfortunate; after trips to some of the most intimidating wine-label regions in the world, and after having met many a winemaker and dirt farmer, I can say unequivocally, "Get over it." And worry not, there are worthwhile shortcuts.

Wine usually needs an importer to get to our fair shores, and each of those importers spends time and effort traveling the great wine regions of the world, tasting their way through wine after wine and creating a portfolio of wines that they feel represents the best of a region. Like winemakers, these wine importers have distinctive palates and styles, and each great wine region of the world has its share of importers championing their indigenous flavors.

The importer's mark typically is on the wine bottle's back label, and it's as good a way as any to work your way through one viticultural wonderland after another without having to do the label-deciphering homework. If Germany beckons, try the Rudi Wiest Collection. If Spain piques your curiosity, there are many quality import ers:

the iconic Jorge Ordonez, Classical Wines of Spain or Salt Lake City's own Peter Grisley. Italy, on the other hand, has a range of greats such as Leonardo Locascio/ Winebow or the dynamic Dalla Terra. And, one can't venture to the south of France without giving the legendary importer Kermit Lynch his due. Lynch spawned a number of others who also wander France, like Weygandt Metzler and Dan Kravitz.

Many of these intrepid souls offer selections under $20, making your global excursions a cost-effective adventure. And by tasting your way through each portfolio as your curiosity guides you, you'll be shocked at how quickly your palate develops and how much more your appreciation for your local wine-savvy restaurateur grows.

Francis Fecteau is owner of Libation, Inc. a Utah-based wine brokerage.

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