

New Restaurant Offers the Cure for Wine List Ills

by Evan Dawson

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There is a maddening chicken-and-egg problem with most restaurant wine lists: Are wine lists stupid because customers don't know much about wine, or are customers uneducated about wine because restaurant wine lists are stupid? I realize that most wine drinkers don't spend all that much time looking over restaurant lists, so this is a bit of hyperbole. But it is not hyperbole to say that restaurant lists need re-thinking.



Start with the descriptors. Just how helpful is it for a customer to read that a wine is, say,

Smooth with smooth berry flavors and a finish of smoothness

That kind of stuff is ubiquitous. Instead of nudging customers toward a more thoughtful approach to wine, this assembly-line description instructs customers that all good wine should taste the same. You

know, unoffensive. Uninteresting. Smooth.

Then there is the length of the wine list. Lately it seems that wine lists fall into two categories:

- 1) Between 50 and 100 wines, all from big distributors. Remarkable how five restaurants in the same city all have roughly the same wine lists.
- 2) Absurdly long, if well intended, and designed to impress the true wine lover. Laminated pages, book form; you couldn't get through it all if you had four hours.

The longer lists can be great fun, I admit. But if you go to dinner with at least one wine lover in your party, and the list is encyclopedic, you run the risk of losing that person for a full half hour. I've done it -- my face buried in the list, paralyzed by options. It can be rude.

Short and sweet

All of this brings me to the revelation that a wonderful wine list can be created with only about a dozen total selections.



My wife and I had dinner at the new Cure, in Rochester's public market. Like a growing number of restaurants, Cure is tuned in to the mixed drink scene. We loved their list, filled with both classic and creative. Then it came time to order wine.

As it turned out, there were six red options, six white, two sparkling. That's it. But instead of the big distributor wines, these were interesting, character-driven wines. Some I had tasted before; others were new to me. Here's the red list, for example:

2012 Chateau de la Presle -- Gamay -- Touraine, Loire, France

2009 Charles Joguet Cuvee de la Cure -- Cabernet Franc -- Chinon, Loire, France

2009 Jean-Max Roger La Grange Dimidre -- Pinot Noir -- Sancerre, Loire, France

2009 Daumen Principaute d'Orange -- Merlot / Cabernet -- Vaucluse, Rhone, France
2011 Clos la Coutale -- Malbec -- Cahors, France

2011 Clos Roche Blanche Cuvee Pif -- Cabernet Franc / Malbec -- Touraine, France

All French, yes. And yes, it's Loire-heavy. But isn't it refreshing to see a range of varieties instead of two dozen anodyne, overpriced Cabernets?

The Clos Roche Blanche was available via quartino for \$19, so we started there, and we ordered a bottle of the Joguet for \$42. (We took most of it home.) Both prices are fair, not even double the standard retail price. Many restaurants seem to think that wine prices start at two-times retail.

Outside the comfort zone

We were inspired, and the experience left me with a few questions for Cure's Wine Director, Caitlin Graham. Cure's owner, Chuck Cerankosky, told me that he gave Caitlin plenty of latitude with her choices. "Our intent was to have a wine list that, instead of trying to cover all the bases, told a story," Cerankosky explained.

The story was clear: Loire wines, often overlooked, offer great value and a delicious range of styles, from light to bigger-bodied. They are food wines, but they are contemplative wines. And it's fun to visit new places through wine. Comfort zones are not stimulating.

But what about the notion that customers demand familiarity? Cure doesn't have a single Chardonnay on its list, for example.

"We've had very little push-back on the list," Graham told me. "The reception has been very positive. I think our guests are willing to allow us to shepherd them through, which is really a matter of education and navigation."

On the issue of education, Graham is talking about more than just the clientele. She's talking about her staff, which has to be prepared to explain what Cot is, what Chinon means, etc.

"French wine labels, especially the obscure, are definitely confusing!" she readily conceded. "We try to include at least one element on the list that will be commonly recognizable, such as region or variety or style. Chatting a little extra about wine labels can be accomplished in a casual, unpretentious manner."

And while the high-volume wines might help boost sales, Graham said there is no pressure from management to toss in a few fallback options.

"We simply don't offer big brands," Graham continued. "By eliminating those options and taking the tack of warm, well informed service, we are able to give our customers the opportunity to try new things without feeling intimidated." In fact, Cure's customers who want to drink wine are almost certainly going to try new things, because that's the only option. And Graham adds that the size of the wine list allows for easier staff training: "We are small, which allows for a little more attention to detail and individuality."



Cure brings the ideal approach to wine education. If a customer wants to learn about what they're drinking, they certainly will. If a customer just wants a wine

well suited to the food, they'll get it. No one should leave feeling put off. And the next time they're out with friends, their Cure experience might spark a conversation: "Charles Joguet! I've actually had one of their wines..."

Author's note: *This week, I begin my new job as Host of the daily afternoon talk show on NPR's affiliate in western New York. A few days ago I learned that Cure is now an underwriter of our station. I had begun work on this wine list story in November, long before making this discovery, and it had no impact on this piece, but I felt I should share it nonetheless. - Evan Dawson*



Evan Dawson is the author of Summer in a Glass: The Coming of Age of Winemaking in the Finger Lakes. It won the 2012 Roederer International Wine Book of the Year. Outside of Palate Press, his wine writing has been published in Wine Spectator, Tasting Panel Magazine, and the New York Cork Report, for which he serves as Managing Editor. He hosts The Connection on WXXI radio, the NPR affiliate in western New York, where he focuses on community affairs. He is a middling but enthusiastic cook.