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FROM THE STUNNED MULLET

PALATE PLEASURES

PICKING A WINNER

Watched a long-anticipated movie last night – called ‘Bottleshock’. It’s hailed as the new ‘Sideways’, with much to appeal to the senses of a wine and quirky comedy lover. Set in Napa Valley wine country in the 1970s amongst a fledgling community of viticulturists, it hails the emergence of New World wines from the fortress of French traditionalism ... A significant time in the history of the vine and a harbinger of the vinous diversity we are offered today.

I won’t spoil it for you by expounding any further on its virtues, but the movie got me thinking about the great pleasure that is associated with wine, as well as the way in which it connects us with a place in time in such a tangible fashion.

Wine means a lot of things to a lot of people. From the passionate collector and cellar list aficionado to a chilled sav blanc in a plastic glass on the beach as the sun sets, or the occasional splurge on a favourite bottle to mark a birthday or anniversary; if we enjoy it, it becomes an intrinsic part of our sensory and emotional lives.

Similarly, the opportunity for a wine-lover to create and source a restaurant wine list is an expressive, creative and ever poetic thing.

In Australia today we have access to not just the wealth of our local wine output, but the world is at our fingertips in a way which was unheard of just a few short years ago. We can so easily get our hands on a Chilean Cabernet blend or an Italian Prosecco. Far from being un-patriotic, the presence of international wines on a wine list celebrates the diversity of wine traditions, provides us with the ability to travel with our tastebuds to different climates, soils and terrain. It further complements our own expansive wine industry by teaching us about the very parts of the world from which wine has been coming from for hundreds, if not thousands of years, as well as the many newly emerging wine producing countries and their plethora of innovations.

However, all this diversity can backfire horribly when it comes to choosing a wine on a list. Human nature often wins the hand and we choose only what is familiar and perceived as safe. Albarino? Never heard of it ... Ditto Petit Verdot, Soave and Tempranillo ...

And never mind trying to decipher just what the hell the wine is, but to attempt to assess the value of something you’ve never heard of is a sure-fire impediment to a sale on the said item.

Just as we look at the price tag of a pair of jeans or a carton of milk and perceive value or lack thereof, we try to assess a wine list in the same way. But with a pair of jeans, for example, you often know the brand, you can touch them, try them on ... you can reasonably accurately ascertain value.

With a wine you’ve never heard of – this is impossible.

That’s why it’s always worth asking! You may be missing an opportunity to try something fantastic. And there’s a good chance that if you’re out somewhere that has such an eclectic choice available, that someone will be around who can offer some good advice.

As in all facets of sales – wine in lists is all about mark-ups – cost price in relation to selling price.

Many people, though, see only the final number, and the smaller the better.

But it depends what you perceive value for money to entail. It could mean that the most expensive wine on a list is \$35 ... But if that wine was bought

wholesale for \$3.00 a bottle, that’s a 1000% mark-up, and not good value at all in a mathematical sense. And there’s quite a good chance that all the other wines cheaper than this are, to put it mildly, ‘plonk’ – and the sort of stuff you would studiously avoid at the bottle-o.

On the other end of the spectrum, you may see a wine for \$150 (immediate thought – ‘ouch’) on a wine list, but that wine may actually wholesale for \$75 a bottle, and may also be a rare collector’s wine which would be nearly impossible for you to get your hands on otherwise ... only a 100% markup (barely covers getting it served to you – really!) not to mention the added value given the unique nature of the wine and the ingenuity used to source it.

Essentially then, high prices do, by no means, spell bad value. Quite the contrary in many cases. Of course, if an average or terrible wine costs a fortune, it is awful value, but if a sublime, soul-uplifting wine that transforms your night comes highly ticketed ...

And that’s not to say that there are not a multitude of very reasonably priced wines out there that will also make your spirit soar, because there most certainly are – and they are often found on those wine lists created with passion by wine lovers.

But the most important thing with wine is to enjoy it! So grab that list with renewed vigour, don’t be afraid to ask for a recommendation or two and get quaffing!

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