

PRAIRIE GRASS

C A F E

Q&A

Getting to Know Rohit Nambiar, General Manager and Wine Program Director

1. How did you become interested in wine?

When I was working at the Four Seasons Hotel in Chicago, I progressed from bar and lounge manager, to assistant room service manager, to assistant banquet manager and then finally I became the restaurant manager. There was a large wine list with a lot of American and international wines. I did a lot of tastings and wine dinners that got me interested in wine. I just wanted to be good at what I was doing. I went through the sommelier exams up to Level II. I am currently the wine buyer for Prairie Grass Cafe.

2. Can you describe your career?

I have always been passionate about the hospitality industry. I spent a year at pastry school in Bombay, India and then another year at a local hospitality school, before working for my aunt and uncle who own The Leela Hotel in Mumbai. I really liked the hospitality business so I enrolled in a four-year management program at Les Roches, Switzerland, where I tasted a lot of wine as part of my training. After graduating from Les Roches, I moved to the United States to work at the Four Seasons Hotel in Chicago. I intended to train with the best and bring what I learned back home but ended up staying and building my career here.

3. What do you think is the most versatile wine?

That's a loaded question. There's so many good wines right now and every country is making great wines.

4. What's the trick for a good wine recommendation?

There are no tricks. The server taking the guest's order should make it simple and ask the right questions to find out what the guest likes.

5. What is your favorite food and wine combination?

A good white wine like a burgundy or Riesling with a piece of fish.

6. What is your current favorite wine?

Right now, as I get older, I prefer white wine. It is more versatile and crisper. But at the end of the day, I'm old school, I like French whites and Italian reds. I also like Greek wine. I like Vietti, an Italian red from Barolo, and William Fevre Chablis Premier Cru from France. They're both on the Prairie Grass Cafe wine list.

7. Prairie Grass Cafe is very conscious about sustainability and sources ingredients from local farmers when possible. Do you mirror that dedication to the environment in your wine list?

My first concern is balance: having a balanced wine list with great balanced wines. I focus on sustainable practices in wine making and if they're organic, great. I've noticed that the big wineries are moving in that direction.

Sarah (Rohit is married to Chef Sarah Stegner) does a fantastic job of sourcing ingredients from small local farms and I try to match her sustainable efforts by carrying wines from local, family owned boutique wineries. We carry a few all-natural wines—no pesticides or chemicals are used at all throughout the whole process—to have a more organic and environmentally friendly list.

8. Are there certain types of wines that you specialize on or focus on when shaping the restaurant's selection?

Over the years, I've picked out wines that I feel are delicious and special and I have paid attention to which of those wines my customers also enjoy. So, our wine list carries some good quality basics and we balance those with some different wines that are a little more surprising. I've noticed Americans really like wines with vanilla and oak notes so I carry a good amount of those.

9. How often does the restaurant's wine list change?

On a regular basis.

10. What do you love most about your job?

I love wine and I love when I put something different on the list and our guests try it and like it—it gives me satisfaction. And that's what wine is about, enjoyment. It should always be enjoyed. Sometimes where you are, who you're with and what you're experiencing can be enhanced by the taste of a great memorable wine.

11. Can people who weren't born with sharp taste buds be a good sommelier? What traits or skills are required to be a successful sommelier?

Yes. Some people are born with it but with enough practice and tasting, anyone can learn it.

12. What is the best way for people to try to learn more about wines without having to buy bottles and bottles of it?

When you go to a restaurant, try something different each time, it's that simple. I also like using the Wine Spectator and Wine Searcher apps.

13. What trips have you recently taken and what most impressed you?

I've been to Chile, Argentina, Portugal, Italy, France, Greece, Spain, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Canada and they all impress me in their own way. But I recently had a visit to Burgundy in France that blew my mind. The vineyards were beautiful and perfect.