

Top Somms Advise Vintners on How to Get on Their Wine Lists

by Laura Ness

Sommeliers and wine directors see and taste a lot of wines. What gets their attention? What's the best way to get attention? We asked them. They were not shy.

Jeremy Dennis of Dio Deko in Los Gatos says, "Sometimes, I have particular needs. Random reps will come in and fill gaps. I work with over 100 wine contacts from a range of distributors, some on a day-to-day basis. Other times, I will take a wine that just strikes me. I love wines with big acidity that are age worthy. I lean towards old world Burgundies that offer the right combination of style and price."

His primary advice to wineries is to find a distributor who will represent you well.

Often, smaller is better. "Choose someone who understands you and what you do. Someone who will be positive and aggressive about presenting your wines. Someone who believes in your brand. If I see a winery twice a year, that's a good thing."

The Dio Deko wine list is sufficiently large that he has the latitude to include names for cachet only, but he's interested in new discoveries. His advice is simple:

"Be true to yourself. Be sure of your vision. Don't try to please the masses! If it's an authentic product, they will come!"



Himself a winemaker, at the tutelage of Ryan Beauregard in the Santa Cruz Mountains, **Mark Bright of Saison (San Francisco)**, has been in the business for 13 years, even though he looks barely old enough to vote, let alone drink. The Chicago native turned San Franciscan is a Rajat Parr disciple and learned much from this Master Sommelier who has influenced the careers of so many.

Says Bright of what he learned from Parr, "The most important is to never stop the search for amazing wines. There are so many fantastic regions and terroirs to explore. Keep an open mind."

His advice to those who want to get on his list, "We do lots of tastings as a group with my sommelier team. Just produce pure, balanced and tasty juice. "



John Lancaster has been compiling the wine list at San Francisco's revered **Boulevard** for 19 years now. He's also a winemaker trying to get his wines placed on other people's lists.

He says that the whole game has changed tremendously since he started. "Frankly, it's the hardest that it's ever been! I think the best days in the wine business are behind me. It's so competitive now. People don't have time to see everyone anymore. A few years ago, every account wanted to see me. Now, nobody returns phone calls!"

Nowadays, he says, business is done via email. "I set up appointments: I don't like cattle calls – I think it's rude! I respect people's stories, and I want to hear them."



Of his selection process, he says, "Sometimes I have a need, like a Gruner Veltliner between \$38 and \$45. Sometimes I taste something, and it blows me away, and I say, 'I have to have this wine whether we need it or not!'"

He counsels other winemakers to spend as much time thinking about the sales piece, the marketing strategy, as about the wines themselves. Says Lancaster, "Have a plan from the git-go. It's harder than you think. Talk to others when you're just getting started, before you even put wine in the bottle!"

Sommelier/author, Chris Sawyer, says the most important criteria in selecting a wine for a list is, "Does this wine work with the food on my menu?" He notes that the traditionally simple wines of 20 years ago no longer cut the mustard, literally. "They can't cope with today's food. I try to find deep wines vs. shallow wines. We've moved away from comfort food and those wines no longer have a place in top restaurants."

Such cuisine complexity requires wines that pair with fine cuisine Says Sawyer, "Wines that were meant to go with comfort food where each bite tastes predictably the same no longer work with the diversified plate where every bite is different. Food comes first. The best food wines do not overpower: they have finesse."

This leads to an obvious point that can't be overstated: Winemakers should always look at the restaurant's menu and wine list before they even pick up the phone to schedule an appointment to taste. Even better, they should eat at the restaurant and let the food guide the selections they ultimately decide to present to the wine buyer.

Although sommelier **James La Mar** is trading in his Somm cup to work for a winery, La Mar has had a stellar career in the Bay Area at darlings including The Woodside Pub and Madera.



While developing the wine list at Chez TJ, La Mar learned from then Sales Director, Matt Ryan of Big Basin Vineyards, that when selling a wine that's good, be generous and don't be a geek. "Be true to yourself, be authentic. Be completely committed to your story and you will be successful."

Erika Szot, who took over from La Mar at Chez TJ, creates pairings for 10 and 16 course menus nightly. She says, "There is a buyer out there for everything. It is our duty to give people what they want."



Of her quest to expand the list, she says, "We have a fairly large list, but we're looking to build a well-balanced one that is more thorough. We'd like to increase our verticals. Pairings are fun with verticals, because you can work with the vintage differences to play with the tannins and acid to tune with the food. Rosés are interesting: they are highly pairable, and consumers love them. I like that you can play around with them, and that they are so many different styles. We are always looking for single vineyard Pinots, and for aromatic whites like Riesling, that pair well with food. And Champagne."

Her advice to wineries is to email her and introduce themselves. "We pride ourselves on travelling around and meeting with up and coming wineries. James (La Mar) took on several new Santa Cruz Mountains producers early on, which was genius. We look for new discoveries. I look forward to hearing your story."

Director of Wine for Madera (Rosewood Resort, Menlo Park), Paul Mekis was tasked with building the list from scratch. From the time he began in 2009 until the present, the list has grown from 600 to 2300 selections. The philosophy that guided him was fairly straightforward.

"I try to find a balance between well recognized wines that customers are familiar with as well as new discoveries from up-and-coming vineyards around the world. Generally, I enjoy offering an assortment of wines that range in style and price point, yet compliment the menu offerings," says Mekis.

Asked what advice he would give a winery who would like to get their wine on his list,

Mekis says, "I recommend scheduling an appointment with me. I love finding a new, upstart winery that makes excellent, well-balanced wines that aren't manipulated and taste like the grape varietal. For me, it's all in a strong terroir that offers a sense of place."

Nobody denies it's a highly competitive world of wine out there. It takes tenacity as much as kismet to land on the right lists. From **Jim Rollston of Manresa**, come these pearls of wisdom: "Make the best wine you can, reflecting your vision about what is unique in your wine versus the rest of the world's wines. I may or may not see the same things you see in your wines, but if you feel you have made a benchmark wine for the region, then you have succeeded no matter the placement on one restaurant's wine list!"

