

**Food Friendly Beverage Programs
Flavor on the Menu
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Why do people dine out?

We go out to dine because we want to experience food that we cannot cook at home. Of course, we also want to be served. Naturally we don't want to have to slave over that hot oven all day, and clean up afterward. Sure we are entirely too busy to cook between work and meetings and soccer practice and ballet. Often there is cause for celebration. More often than that we have business to conduct. No matter the reason, we choose the restaurant based upon the dining experience that we expect, and it is up to the restaurant to exceed our expectations. Even if the service is friendly and warm, and the wine list is remarkable, if the food really fails to deliver, does any of us make an attempt to go back and try it again?

Food is the key. It is all about the food.

As servers, we have been led to believe that diners several years ago, in one of those ignominious polls, declared to the industry that the most important aspect of the restaurant is service, and like winos fondling a brown paper bag, we lapped it up. We believed it because even though we know how important service is, we needed validation. After all, that was in the days leading up to the crowning of today's celebrity chefs, and we could see the writing on the wall. Alas, we have been bamboozled. In a blatant attempt to motivate us to deliver better service and have more pride in our work, we were intentionally misled.

In that now infamous American Express poll many years ago, Platinum card holders were asked what it would take to bring them BACK to a restaurant. Cardholders responded with varied opinions, but it was generally agreed upon that it was recognition that would most often bring them back. Recognition is, of course, one important aspect of service, but a very specific one. Platinum cardholders did not actually rank food as being the third most important motivation to return. They all agreed that they would not go back if the food was bad---they assumed that if they were choosing to go back, the food was at least good, and then it would be personal recognition that would sway their decision (the ability to secure a table, perhaps?)

The chefs deserve their celebrity status, for it is their neck that rests upon the proverbial guillotine. It is the food that is on the plate, that is dissected and discussed, picked at and pondered over, and perhaps occasionally even enjoyed, if only the dish can survive the scrutiny. Surely, no one would return to a restaurant if the food was not good, unless of course the restaurant was giving the food away for free.

Everything that we do within the confines of a great restaurant revolves around the cuisine. The ambiance and service enhance the experience, and strive to make our guests feel comfortable, or to achieve need-to-be-there status. We choose our fixtures, our furniture, and all of our equipment based upon our culinary choices. Even our floor coverings and wall treatments reflect the culinary direction. Certainly the flatware and glassware are selected accordingly, as are linens (or not), uniforms, menus, graphics, lighting, and yes, our front of the house personnel, too.

Why then, is there a preponderance of wine lists in this vast culinary landscape that we travel so freely, that seem to be as disjointed and disparate from the food as they are reflective of the whims of the creator (and perhaps scores from the magazines?) It often even appears quite obvious that the food is an afterthought when assembling the wine list, yet it is the driving force of all other restaurant decisions. Wine's place is on the table, with food. Wine should make the food taste even better. Wine should not dominate or intimidate, but should supplement and complement. How can a wine be selected without regard to the food at hand? Indeed, how can a wine be selected for the wine list, without regard to the menu?

Fortunately, mirroring the trend towards more flavor in our culinary choices, there seems to be an ever-growing trend towards more food-friendly and flavorful beverage programs in the US today. Notice the phrase beverage program, as compared to my earlier use of the antiquated,

or at least overly specific term, wine list. If your restaurant brags of a great wine list, chances are you have underestimated the need for an extensive overall beverage program. Selection of food-friendly beverages, beverages that mirror your menu and enhance the experience, range from non-alcohol alternatives to exotic spirits, some of which should be fashioned into house cocktails, including all categories of spirits, as well as sake, beer, cider, water, tea, coffee, soft drinks, spritzers, infusions, juices, and of course, wine.

Food-friendly can mean so many things. Some beverages are selected because they fit well into the theme of the restaurant. Other libations can be chosen to help set the tone, or to be variations on a theme, still working within the theme of the restaurant. Many are garnished accordingly, to bait the imbiber into becoming a diner. All beverages should be chosen, and positioned accordingly, because of their affinity to the food being served.

Food-friendly means that no beverage has been chosen for the program that offends the food or disrupts the experience. Of course there are certain spirits that should always be stocked, and of course you will serve them as appropriate, or as the guest requests them served. All beverages are fair game, and this actually spells opportunity for the restaurateur. Why would we intentionally choose beverages that dominate or detract?

Choosing wines and beverages for the program that work well with the food on the menu does not require a Ph.D. in physics or a NASA commission. It is based upon common sense. It requires a practical person who likes to eat, and who trusts her/his own ability to make decisions about what she/he likes and doesn't like, and who can relate to her/his customers' needs.

When choosing wines for a steak house, the creator of said program has creative license (or lack thereof) to choose every big red that will not be ready to drink in our lifetime, and if the clientele allow, several great wines that already are ready, or will be, as long as the expense accounts are willing. What if your menu is more experimental, like so many of America's best restaurants, anxious to explore new horizons, create new combinations, and utilize ingredients previously unknown to us? What if your menu is constantly evolving but your cellar door is less than constantly revolving?

Choose wines that will drink admirably when young (but will age gracefully if allowed.) Select wines that are vibrant and full of fruit. Look for acidity in the wine, the more the merrier, and remember that acid in wine may very well be the single most important part of any match with food, in that you cannot marry the two well without some form of acid in the glass. Most importantly, look for balance in wine. Balance in the structural components of the wine, such as the balance between the fruit and the acid, and the subsequent balance of the alcohol, the tannins, and the sugars, (which can be key when matching with various types of food.) With this in mind, all levels of richness and power can be selected, always with a mind to the food, always keeping a watchful eye on textural similarity. It is highly recommended to eat while working on the list, and I urge you to always taste menu items with the wines you are considering for placement before they are actually finalized.

I am so disappointed when I hear words from a supposed foodie's mouth, or perhaps a diehard diner, when they say that the wine was fabulous, but the food was just OK. That means we have failed. We try our best to guide them, but often they choose their own way. They are influenced by their peers, or wine geeks, or the writers, who often fail to remind them that the high scores are usually reserved for wines for the cellar, rarely for the table, certainly not in the near future. How can we control their wine choices?

It is not our position to dictate to our guests what they drink with their meal. It is, however, our obligation to choose appropriate beverages and wine list selections for the menu and the cuisine. We have to represent all types of diverse styles of wine and beverages on our list. It is obvious that you don't order those big wines with delicate dishes or subtle spices, isn't it? Anyone who knows anything about food would never make such a gross misjudgment. Yet I hear these words often, and usually about just such an obviously disjointed match, that perhaps wasn't obvious to the guest, because they didn't really understand the food (or the

wine), and now by serving them that three year old Cabernet with their fresh uni, we have guaranteed that they never will.

It is our responsibility to the food, to the chef, nay, more importantly, to our guests, to select wines for our list that enhance the dining experience, to provide tools to our servers so that they can succeed in these situations, and to train them so that they have the wherewithall to use the provided tools.

From whence come these busboy-cum-wine-stewards that have materialized recently that truly do believe that the dining experience is more about them and their abominable creations of biblical proportions, than it is about their chefs and the food that is on the plate. There is no place for these egos in this business. Wine list awards and accolades mean little without the food to back it up. In which reality did it become commonplace that so many of these so-called wine destinations have become synonymous with bad, or uninteresting food? When did great dining establishments begin allowing young egos to strut their impudence across the cellar floor and wield it upon their guests as if they and the wine they can acquire and sell back to the diner at ridiculous markups were more powerful and potent than the centerpiece of the dining experience, the food? Don't ever forget: wine's place is on the table, enjoyed with good food.

Our job... our *responsibility* to our guests, is to create a program that helps our servers to ensure that every guest is provided with the opportunity to enjoy the entire dining experience. With the exciting new flavor thresholds that chefs are experimenting with, and the myriad of flavors represented on many menus today, sommeliers and managers must take a long hard look at, or taste of, each wine chosen for the list, each cocktail featured, and each beverage selected for the program. Is it balanced? Does it complement the food? Does it enhance the dining experience? Will it fit within our theme?

Food-friendly is also flavor-friendly, which in turn becomes guest friendly. Food-friendly is user-friendly, which results in a friendly bottom line.