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Why Waiters Should Know Wine

Before I continue, I want to go on record as having acknowledged how lucky I am. I live in San Francisco. We have great restaurants that are generally very friendly to wine lovers. We have liberal and pervasive corkage policies, and the wine lists in the average restaurant are good. Heck, even the wine lists in the average Thai restaurant are pretty good. In our finest restaurants the lists can be phenomenal. In more and more restaurants I am also finding a proper selection of good stemware -- a big plus. Things are good for wine lovers in San Francisco, and they seem to be getting better.  
  
Except in one area.

I continually run across waitstaff who are seriously clueless about wine. And I don't mean someone who can't tell me the different varietals that are in a particular wine labeled as "Red Blend" on the wine list (although that would be nice, too). I mean so clueless that, when the Pinot Noir poured by the glass is sold out, they suggest a Zinfandel because "it's similar." I mean so clueless as to not know how to pour wine into a decanter (hint: turning the bottle upside down vertically and sticking it into the neck of the decanter is NOT the right way). I mean so clueless that they've never even tasted any of the wines on the by-the-glass list.

My point here is actually NOT to complain about restaurant service, if you can believe it. When stuff like that happens, I just let it slide. It's certainly not the server's fault, and while I am a serious wine geek, I don't go around imposing my type-A sense of wine on everyone else.

I'm actually trying to talk about what an enormous business mistake restaurateurs are making by not educating their servers about wine in general, and particularly, the wine they serve in the restaurant. Take a look [at this (somewhat oblique) study](http://www.winespiritsdaily.com/2006/12/restaurant-wine-promotions-that-work.html). Among other things, it points out just how powerful a sales tool the average waitperson is when it comes to wine. According to this study, a waitpersons recommendation is the single most effective tool for getting diners to purchase wine, and then to purchase wines that the restaurant might be interested in guiding them to for economic reasons. And given that wine (and other liquor) is usually the highest margin sales item for any restaurant, there is a significant and direct cost to having wine-ignorant waitstaff. You're leaving money on the table.

Let me turn that around and state it in the positive converse: the more your waitstaff know about wine the more money you stand to make as a restaurateur.

Apart from simply being able to sell the wine better, a wine-savvy waitstaff are much more likely to guide diners to wines that they will actually like, which makes for happier customers and, I'd be willing to bet, even more wine sales.

Now it's easy for me to sit here (a blogger, not a chef or restaurant owner) and spout off about how restaurants should take the time and energy to train their staff better, but honestly, it's not that hard. Many of your distributors will even do it for you, in case you didn't know. I'd bet many of them are happy to come in and educate your staff about the wines you serve, mostly because they probably know how much better a knowledgeable staff sells their product than an ignorant one.

Of course, it would be great if more restaurants would also focus on the skills of wine service, so I don't have to leap up from my chair and grab that bottle of old Bordeaux from the server before he or she pours all the sediment into the decanter, or tell them to stop before they fill my wine glass up to the very brim. But I know that's asking a lot.

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