

Wine On

Experienced restaurateur says good quality vino a must-have menu addition

DOUG WILLIAMS knows a thing or two about wine. Many credit him for turning BrewBakers into the Fredericton restaurant with “that amazing wine list” (arguably one of the best in Atlantic Canada.) Williams, however, is more apt to credit a couple of sommeliers who guided him along the way, namely Nathan Corey and Doug Watling.

The story starts back in 2000 when Williams was general manager at BrewBakers. “I was fascinated that people would actually pay \$60 for a bottle of wine.” So he and the bar manager decided to increase the inventory. Yet they bought haphazardly, based on personal preference.

For awhile, the novelty of having a growing wine list created a buzz but their approach was void of rhyme or reason. Enter sommeliers Corey and Watling. “Nathan got us focused and Doug took us to the next level. He really grew the BrewBaker’s wine list and took it from something scattered to what it is today.”

Meanwhile, Williams could see that having a decent wine cellar was sexy. If he wanted to put the restaurant on the map, he’d better get savvy. So in 2003 he started taking sommelier courses and has worked his way through the series up to the Masters level.

Early on, Williams tracked sales including the wine dollar purchase per customer to the average bottle price per customer. “We found that the expensive stuff [over \$100] doesn’t sell well but it brings people in.” It’s also there for the occasional wine connoisseur who is not pinching pennies. “You can never tell when customers come in what they are going to spend on wine,” says Williams recalling a time when a rather disheveled character sporting a cap arrived on the scene. After chatting with the waiter a few minutes he ordered a \$225 bottle – and became a frequent customer, always ordering pricey wines.

So what does Williams recommend to build a reputable wine list?

First, budget some money – whatever you can afford – to build up your inventory. Then decide what products you are going to have. Make sure it’s diversified and don’t confuse your own tastes with everybody else’s.” It’s also important to have a selection by price points spanning low to high.

Next, pay attention to your menu. If it’s heavily weighted with fresh seafood, you’ll want to offer more white wines than red. Also break the wine list into styles on your menu. For example, define a wine as a light, medium or full-bodied fruity wine and state if it’s dry or off-dry (meaning sweet.). “Don’t call them sweet wines. You’re not supposed to order it because it’s what you drank when you were 20. Now you’re supposed to like dry wines,” he says with a chuckle. (Although in a blind taste test, 75 per cent of people go for the sweet wine.)

Figure out where your “hot zone” is and order the bulk of your inventory accordingly. “From my experience, the hot zone is about one and a quarter up to two times your average entrée price. So if your average entrée is \$18 then your hot zone is \$24-\$36.”

Williams adds that if your average entrée price is \$18 and you don’t have anything on your wine list less than \$30 a bottle, many customers will simply buy beer or pop. If you don’t have anything over \$30 you’ll also lose sales because some people would have bought \$45 bottles even though the \$30 bottle variety may be just as good.

Along with different price ranges and wine styles, it’s imperative to have a knowledgeable wait staff. The wine guru says, “Staff training is tough, time consuming and expensive but you have to do it. Brings to mind the old joke: ‘The only thing worse than training someone and having them leave, is not training them and having them stay’.”

Asked about the most expensive wine he’d ever tasted, Williams says it was a bottle of Bordeaux, Chateau Lafite Rothschild (\$1,300). “Twelve of us split it. Tried it once; don’t need to try it again.” Although expensive wines are often divine, Williams also enjoys some relatively cheap wines – proving that it’s always worth asking a sommelier for their personal inexpensive favourites. For a decent summer white he recommends Lingenfelder Bird Label Riesling and Trapiche Pinot Noir from Argentina. “It’s about \$12 a bottle but has some Pinot Noir characteristics.”

POSTSCRIPT: From 2003-2008 BrewBakers was the recipient of the Wine Spectator Award of Excellence. Alas, pity for BrewBakers, Doug Williams has moved on. He now co-owns the Garrison District Ale House in Fredericton. It opened last November. 🍷

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Volume 14, Number 6 (2003) Danny Williams is elected as Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, winning 34 of 48 seats in the House of Assembly. He says he threw his hat into the political arena because he thought he could make a real difference to the provincial economy.