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Tastings | *Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher*

On the Menu: Wines Not in Stores

Restaurants Offer Hidden Treasures; The Refosco Lesson

Have you had a Refosco recently? We hadn't, either.

Refosco is an Italian red wine we used to drink from time to time when we were younger. We remember it being fun and slightly rustic. But we rarely see Refosco anymore and pretty much forgot about it. So you can imagine our surprise when we visited a restaurant recently that was serving a wine made predominantly of Refosco – from California. It was called Mattia from Palmina winery, and it was 55% Refosco, 30% Cabernet Franc and 15% Merlot. The Refosco grape is so rare in California that the state doesn't report how many acres are planted, but the number is very small.

We ordered it, of course, and it was outstanding, with lusty earthiness and real vibrancy. We had never seen this wine before, and there's a good reason for that: The winery made only 280 cases and most went to restaurants. Only a small percentage found its way to retailers.

Over the past couple of months we've written about some of the small annoyances of wine service at restaurants. Readers have suggested quite a few more. But all of this helpful criticism shouldn't obscure something very important: There are all sorts of terrific wines that you will usually find only at restaurants. If you are going to expand your palate and taste some really unusual and interesting stuff, restaurants are key.

We have written in the past about how to decode a wine list, but no point is more important than this: Look for the unusual. Quite a few good wineries focus their sales on restaurants, not retail stores. Not only that, but ordering a wine that you've never seen before makes the whole issue of markup far less relevant. Whenever someone says to us, "Why should I pay three times what I'd pay for a wine at the corner store?" we want to say, "Why are you ordering a wine you see at that corner store?" Sure, there are some restaurants where the wine list is so lackluster that you have no choice. But, increasingly, restaurants do offer something special if you spend a little time with the wine list.

Unique Experience

Consider Navarro Vineyards Gewurztraminer. We love the spicy, unique taste of Gewurz, and Navarro routinely makes one of America's best. We celebrated our daughter Media's 18th birthday at New York's Le Cirque restaurant last month. The wine list was huge and filled with some reasonably priced wines and a lot of famous wines that cost thousands of dollars. Amid all of these, Dottie spied Navarro's 2004 Gewurz for \$55, the best buy on the list. We ordered it to go with the seafood-heavy tasting menu Media selected, and it was excellent – dry, spicy and filled with personality. We felt so lucky to have it because we knew that we'd rarely see it in a store.

Deborah Cahn, who owns Navarro with her husband, Ted Bennett, says the winery makes about 1,900 cases of the Gewurz. Most is sold directly from the winery to consumers, and about 500 cases go to restaurants. The winery doesn't sell to retailers (except a tiny amount to a few old friends.) Why? "I think all of our wines show better with food. They are meant to have with a meal. So for us, selling to restaurants that we like to eat in is almost a form of advertising, because it introduces the wine to people who otherwise wouldn't have a chance to come to the Anderson Valley to try our wines." By the way, the Gewurz sells for \$18 at the winery, which means the markup at Le Cirque was about three times retail. But we're not complaining. It's sure cheaper than a plane ticket to California.

Steve Clifton, the owner-winemaker at Palmina says small wineries that make unusual wines, such as his Mattia, count on restaurants to showcase their wines. “Because we’re sort of different than the norm, it takes sommeliers who are willing to hand-sell this type of wine,” he told us. “Italian varietals from California need a lot of education for people to get behind them.” His wines, he said, “are purchased by and sold by really excited sommeliers.” In our experience, an excited sommelier makes for a fun dinner.

We recently visited a restaurant because we saw on its wine list online that it had Littorai, one of California’s sought-after Chardonnays. The winery’s total production is about 3,000 cases. A third of that goes to the winery’s mailing list and the other two-thirds to restaurants. Ted Lemon, the owner-winemaker, says he doesn’t have any bias against retailers, but that’s how the winery has always done it and, with so little supply, it works fine. Besides, he says, “it’s important that each bottle be an ambassador. We want to get the word out there as far and wide as we can,” and getting the wine into restaurants does that. In addition, he said, at restaurants “it’s going to get treated with the respect and attention it deserves.”

“It’s the magic of food and wine,” he told us. “When you sit down to eat there, you’re not only the captive of the chef’s food but you’re the captive of what’s in the glass. If it’s interesting and complex enough to reveal itself during that meal, you’re going to have a really good time.” Mr. Lemon said that especially winemakers who “make wine that’s a little bit more elegant or subtle” really appreciate their wines being enjoyed over a long period of time with a fine meal at a restaurant.

One of the advantages of fine restaurants with good wine cellars is that you can often have bottles with some age on them that you couldn’t find in stores, and you can have some confidence that they’ve been kept well. We recently had dinner at a restaurant in New York called The Modern at the Museum of Modern Art. We did our homework beforehand – considering the ease of the Internet these days and how many restaurants have sites, we’d really recommend this – and discovered that the chef and wine director were both from Alsace. Our advice is always to order a wine that seems to be the passion of the restaurant, so when we got there, we told the sommelier to wow us with an Alsatian wine that cost around \$100 or less (it was a special occasion). He did not know we are wine writers.

From the cellar he brought a 1985 Alsatian Pinot Gris from Léon Beyer. That’s right – a 22-year-old white. It was golden colored and smelled of fruit, earth and wisdom and it was in a word, spectacular, with the kind of complexity and depth that only age can bring. This is simply not an experience we could have had by dropping in to the local wine store.

A Winning “Threesome”

These experiences are not available only at big-city restaurants. In Tallahassee, Fla, recently, we dropped into a cute little place called Albert’s Provence, and Dottie noticed a wine we’d never seen before: “Threesome” Rhône-style blend from Léal Vineyards in the San Benito region of California. The wine, from the 2004 vintage, was a blend of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre. We enjoy trying California’s Rhône blends, but we often find them overly aggressive and somewhat harsh. This one was smooth and winning. The winery made 1,268 cases of this wine. Of the winery’s 10,000-case production, almost all is sold directly to consumers, or to restaurants. Why the focus on restaurants? “The ambiance, the food, the wine – our wine shines a lot better in that situation,” the owner of the winery, Frank Léal, told us. “And we get the loyal fan. They taste it in the restaurant, they join our wine club, they look for our wine.”

It’s also not just fancy places that offer unusual wines. More Mexican restaurants these days offer Mexican wines. A little Indian place we visited recently was pouring white Beaujolais by the glass. We don’t often see white Beaujolais, and we’re not generally big fans of it, anyway, often finding it thin. But this one, from Jean-Paul Brun, was excellent, with ripe Chardonnay fruit and good acidity that was perfect with our Indian food. Our favorite little Italian place, a cash-only family spot, has an owner who cares about wine, so he always features a wine special that he found himself (it’s written in chalk on a blackboard – it’s that kind of place). Recently, it was 2001 Trauchard Cabernet from Napa Valley for \$28. It was earthy and broad and, interestingly, reminded us very much of a good Italian wine. Having a bottle with any age at a restaurant is always a treat, and 2001 was a very good year.

Good wineries work very hard to get their wines into restaurants, and many restaurants work very hard to offer interesting, different wines. You are the third part of that equation. If you see something new and different on the list, take a chance and order it.