

A *sommelier* THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS



At a recent meeting with a fellow sommelier Kim Bickley, I put a series of questions to her which we discussed, no not over a bottle of Grange, but over a cup of coffee. Kim Bickley is currently Head Sommelier for Luke Mangan's Glass Brasserie at Hilton Sydney. Here is an extract of our conversation.

1. How should, or do, Sommeliers and Chefs work together on food and wine pairings (if at all?)

Speaking for Glass Brasserie, our Chefs Luke Mangan, Joe Pavlovich and I work together on food and wine combinations mostly with set menus such as our 'Degustation Menu' and any wine dinner menus. Communication is mostly but not exclusively in terms of flow; that is, where possible, white meat and light weight dishes come before red meat/ heavy weight dishes so that 'light to heavy' wines and 'white to red' can flow in the same order.

2. Should the Chef seek a sommelier's input?

Communication is vital to the success of any business and especially between Chefs and Sommeliers, I believe input works best both ways.

3. Should all restaurants have a sommelier?

In my opinion any restaurant with a good wine list should have a Sommelier. Such a person can and does often help in the management of the business as well. A good Sommelier can offer a restaurant increased beverage revenue in sales and margins.

4. On average how often are you asked to recommend a wine?

More and more often, I would say around 60-80% of the tables ask for a recommendation. Interestingly 10 years ago the majority of people were asking "what's a Sommelier?" rather than "Can I see the Sommelier?"

5. How do you choose your wines for the (Hilton) Cellar?

I choose the wines based on the overall quality of the wines, their value for money and the general balance of the wine list that I'm putting them on - (does it have a place on the list?). Almost all wines are tasted before listing and blind tasted if I'm looking at more than one sample to fill a certain category. If it's a wine I cannot taste, such as very expensive Bordeaux, Burgundy or rare wines, I look for opinions from people like Jancis Robinson, Lisa Perrotti-Brown, Clive Coates, and James



Kim Bickley, Head Sommelier for Luke Mangan's Glass Brasserie at Hilton Sydney



Halliday etc. etc.

6. Should Sommeliers always agree with the customer on their wine choice?

Yes and no, I'm a big believer in relaxed, friendly and hospitable service and if someone wants to drink Shiraz with fish or put their \$500 bottle of Grand Cru Burgundy in an ice slush so it's almost at zero degrees when they drink it, then that is absolutely their prerogative. On the other hand, if someone orders a wine that I think is not drinking at its best I will certainly offer my opinion and suggest something more suitable.

7. What makes a good sommelier?

A good Somm is someone that most importantly LOVES wine and customer service. It also helps to be open minded, committed to working long hours often with late nights and happy to be in a job that requires almost continual study. And in my opinion, the best of the best are the Sommeliers who are totally modest and not arrogant at all about the knowledge that they have acquired the ones that can have a good laugh and especially at themselves.

8. What is your favourite wines

(red, white, overseas, Australian)?

That is a tough question and one that is asked often. I love Riesling, whether is sweet, medium or dry; good Chardonnay and some of those interesting varietals. I also have a special place in my heart for DRC La Tache, as it was a bottle of this famous wine that ignited my passion to become a Sommelier.

Greg Bondar

Food and Wine Editor



THE SECRET OF MATCHING WINES TO

chilli

BASED DISHES

I am extremely well qualified to write on the subject of pairing wines with chilli based dishes given that whilst most children grew up with mother's milk I was subjected to chillies grown and prepared by my (pardon the pun) 'hot' tempered father.

Chillies and wine has always been a challenging combination for chefs and sommeliers and before we look at the secret of pairing chillies with wine I want to make it perfectly clear that chillies are botanically a fruit. Hot peppers (chillies) are often used to spice up dishes, and they are especially popular in ethnic cuisine including Mexican, Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, Arab, Italian, Hungarian and Spanish cooking.

Waiters and sommeliers probably know, or should know, that water is useless in putting out the flame burning on your tongue so don't even bother - the only liquid that truly neutralises that blaze is alcohol and this now explains why I became a wine writer as I have been putting out chilli burns once I discovered as a boy that it had a dual effect of reducing the burning sensation in my mouth whilst at the same time making me feel 'happy'.

As every chef, sommelier, wine waiter and restaurateur knows wine and food were meant for each other as each individually enhances and strengthens the experience of the other. Excluding beer, particularly sweet style beers which act as an excellent foil for dishes with a lot of chilli heat, I am looking at pairing chilli with wine and there are plenty of wine pairing options for chilli, especially if restaurant patrons prefer red wines which display a good balance between acidity and tannin.

A typical restaurant wine menu will invariably have a range of domestic and foreign wines which will be from popular grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz which are both ideal grape varieties for chilli based dishes. However, I am recommending the lesser known grape varieties such as Malbec or Tempranillo. These specific red wine varietals are able to handle the traditional chilli spice. For the white wine lover, my recommendation is a dry-style German or Alsace Riesling or even a sparkling wine as the bubbles can help reduce impact of the spice. I am also an advocate of any dry Rose as a very viable option for pairing chilli with wine especially if customers do not wish to be tempted to experiment with red or white wines.

As a wine writer I learnt early that we detect four distinct flavours with our tongue: sweet, sour, salty and bitter while our nose is able to differentiate over 200 different aromas. That said the secret in pairing food (chilli) with wine lies in the combination of our sensory qualities on the tongue, in the mouth and on the nose. We are able to experience a vast array of flavour and nuances so in pairing wines with foods we need to be cognisant of the flavours of the foods which can contradict and/or complement our wine selections.

Greg Bondar
Food and Wine Editor