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ON WINE

Why Sommeliers Are the New Restaurant Stars

By Jay McInerney

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HER GLASS RUNNETH OVER | Carla Rzeszewski, sommelier at the Breslin in New York. FRANÇOIS DISCHINGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Some 30 years ago, a Baltimore lawyer who published a newsletter about wine out of his suburban Maryland home became the most influential and powerful figure in the wine world. Influenced by Ralph Nader's consumer advocacy, Robert Parker wanted to make the previously arcane subject of French wine accessible to the American public. His hundred-point rating system seemed to unlock the mysteries of oenophilia for everyday drinkers, and his taste for bold, ripe wines eventually had a big influence on the way wine was made around the world. (Mr. Parker's palate is more nuanced than his detractors would have you believe, but that's another story.) The Wine Spectator, Mr. Parker's competition, promoted a vision of the wine universe that was remarkably similar: Big wine, big points. All successful revolutions breed their reactions, and while no single figure has arisen to challenge Mr. Parker's supremacy, the rise of the sommelier has been a significant countervailing force in the last decade. Sommeliers are the new celebrities of the restaurant world, and collectively they are increasingly influencing the way we think about wine and drink it.

This state of affairs would have been hard to predict back in the '70s, when the word sommelier denoted a scary guy in a tux with a heavy French accent and a silver ashtray on a chain around his neck, whose *raison d'être* was to make you overpay for a bottle of French wine while making you feel like a complete idiot in the process. In the '80s, as Americans started to pay more attention to wine a few pioneers redefined the job for an American audience. In New York, Kevin Zraly of Windows on the World and Daniel Johnnes, at Montrachet, brought wine to center stage at their respective posts, while a grad school dropout named Larry Stone, who worked as a sommelier in Seattle, beat the French on their own turf when he won a competition in Paris for world's Best Wine Sommelier in French Wine. Mr. Zraly has since become a highly

influential educator and author through his *Windows on the World* Wine course. Mr. Johnnes, often called the dean of American sommeliers, has extended his influence as a wine importer, wine director of Daniel Boulud's restaurant group, and founder of La Paulée de New York, a hugely successful festival that's a Bacchanalian celebration of Burgundy. (It is winding up this weekend in San Francisco.) This first generation of American sommeliers are seldom seen on the floor of a restaurant but they've inspired legions of younger followers.

ENOFILE: SOME PICKS FROM TOP
SOMMELIERS



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FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Nowadays, sommeliers are as ubiquitous as reality-TV stars, likely to be too young to remember where they were when Kennedy was shot, and eager to sell you on a moderately priced, small-production Pinot Noir from Tasmania. The new generation of somms can talk about floral scents and mineral undertones if necessary, but they may also refer to "sick juice" in moments of enthusiasm.

Carla Rzeszewski of the Breslin Bar & Dining Room in New York could single-handedly demolish all residual stereotypes about haughty sommeliers. Her hair color changes with her moods from blue to blonde to purple and she

prefers biker boots to pumps. She came to New York to pursue acting ambitions, and after graduating from NYU found herself tending bar at the Blue Water Grill. As her 30th birthday approached, she began to suspect her acting career might not take off. Taking stock of her passions, she realized that she liked to travel, eat and drink and decided to focus on wine. She confided her ambition to Laura Maniec, the beverage director at BR Guest restaurant group, which owned Blue Water Grill. "She helped me to structure my studies," Carla says. "I sat for a year and a half at home reading. I started going to tastings." Later she took a job at Hearth under Paul Grieco, the goateed Canadian who has become an icon in the sommelier community, famous for his quirky, erudite essays embedded in Hearth's wine list and for his almost fanatical devotion to Riesling. Mr. Grieco helped her to hone her palate and gave her one of his stick-on Riesling tattoos.

In 2009, after she had spent one shift tending bar at April Bloomfield's new restaurant, the Breslin, co-owner Ken Friedman pulled her aside and said, "How'd you like to take over the wine program?" "It was the moment I'd been waiting for," she says, "but I was terrified." Two and a half years later, she's made a name for herself as a sommelier and has assembled a quirky and adventurous wine list that's well suited to the powerful flavors of Ms. Bloomfield's cooking. "Right now," she says, "I'm in love with the wines of Corsica and Liguria and also sherry."

'Sommeliers are increasingly influencing the way we think about wine and drink it.'

Not all sommeliers have the same palate, but particularly among the younger generation there are points of consensus about wine. Perhaps most importantly, somms tend to see wine in relation to food, because that's one of the most important

aspects of their job. Unlike wine critics, who usually taste without food, or at most with a few crackers, sommeliers don't judge wine as a stand-alone entity. Big, rich, powerful, ripe wines that may be a meal unto themselves don't necessarily complement most of the food that we eat every day (steak being the inevitable exception). "A sommelier's approach might focus on balance and freshness, rather than overpower with concentration, since we are constantly thinking about how best to work with a chef and their cuisine," says Aldo Sohm, the head sommelier at Le Bernardin, who won the World's Best Sommelier competition in 2008 and now has his own line of glassware and an Aldo Sohm signature Laguiole corkscrew.

Somms are almost inevitably acid freaks: They favor wines with high acidity because acid lifts and frames the tastes of most food—which is why we squeeze a wedge of lemon on a filet of sole or a plate of asparagus. This is one reason somms love Riesling, and also Pinot Noir, provided it doesn't get too ripe and flabby. Robert Parker sometimes uses the phrase "low-acid" as an approbative; on Planet Somm, acid rules. "Acidity is the electric spark that ignites a wine," says Rajat Parr, an Indian-born sommelier who currently works at San Francisco's Michael Mina and moonlights as a winemaker in Santa Barbara, Calif. Co-author of "Secrets of the Sommeliers," Mr. Parr is an outspoken proponent of certain tenets beloved of most of his peers. His ideal is "balance," he worships Burgundy (aka Geek Heaven) and cool-climate regions, and he's an opponent of super-ripe, high-alcohol wines. "We all need the critics," Rajat says, though his palate tends to be very different from those of the critics who dominated the wine scene in the

last two decades. On Planet Somm, balance trumps power, big is not necessarily a compliment and Bordeaux is more admired than loved. Novelty and obscurity are valued too, sometimes to an absurd degree. "Somms are filled with prejudices," says Jordan Lari, the 32-year-old sommelier at Geoffrey Zakarian's Lambs Club, "some well-founded, some completely off base," citing the reflexive preference for Old World wines as one of the latter. Somms also suffer from a weakness for wines from the Jura and for obscure grape varietals.

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"If you're only relying on obscure wines you're missing the point," Mr. Parr says, acknowledging this tendency. "The main point is hospitality and service and the guest needs to recognize some of the things on this list."

I haven't seen anyone in a restaurant ask for a sommelier's autograph yet but I think it's only a matter of time. Aldo Sohm's got his signature on that corkscrew, and I'm pretty sure I spotted a Daniel Johnnes T-shirt the last time I was in Burgundy. I have no doubt the influence of sommeliers will become more important as the profession grows and as more of its practitioners move into winemaking, writing and teaching. Meantime, a documentary called "Somm," which follows several test candidates as they prepare to take the exam for the Court of Master Sommeliers, is coming soon to a theater near you.

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