



The Best *Wine Lists* In America

Here are the results of RESTAURANT HOSPITALITY's 16th Annual Best Wine Lists in America Competition. Our judges, the wine experts at the Beverage Testing Institute, say this year's entries were among the best ever. BY JERALD O'KENNARD

What factors contribute most to the success of a restaurant? An ideal location? Great food? How about a perfect wine list? Your wine list should be a major profit center for your business, regardless of your mark-up policy. If you already have a great wine list, you know what I mean. You're probably already experiencing wine sales that account for 20% or more of your bottom line. If you don't have a great list, let's examine how to get one by taking a close look at some of the best. Fortunately, we have this year's winners of the 16th Annual RH Wine List Competition to learn from. No matter what kind of restaurant you have, the principles of a successful list will apply to you.

Each year, the competition receives wine lists from around the country entered into three categories: international lists, U.S. lists and short lists. This year's winners are:

2005 Winners

INTERNATIONAL CATEGORY

- 1st Place: Charlie Trotter's, Chicago
- 2nd Place: Restaurant Gary Danko, San Francisco
- 3rd Place: Canlis Restaurant, Seattle

U.S. CATEGORY

- 1st Place: The Herbfarm, Woodinville, WA
- 2nd Place: Annie Gunn's, Chesterfield, MO
- 3rd Place: Wente Restaurant, Livermore, CA

SHORT LIST

- 1st Place: Southpark Seafood Grill, Portland, OR
- 2nd Place: Vermillion Restaurant, Alexandria, VA
- 3rd Place: L'Uraku, Honolulu

Internationally Known

In years past, encyclopedia-like international wine lists were the badges of success that restaurateurs strived to attain. While impressive, these huge lists have become a very expensive and difficult-to-manage proposition in today's market. In the international category, one expects to see a strong representation of wines from classic producers in France, Italy, California and Australia. What sets this year's winning lists apart is the selection from novel, smaller producers in up-and-coming wine regions. By offering a relatively smaller selection with more focus on interesting, lesser-known producers and a greater sense of individuality, these international lists have the breadth and the "wow" factor while being manageable and profitable.

The first place winning international wine list, from the internationally renowned Charlie Trotter's, has all the "wow" a restaurant could possibly want (see the sidebar) for some amazing highlights and rarities. As judges, we were impressed by the se-

lections, the creativity and the very readable presentation of the list.

Trotter's list is divided up into basic sections, such as "White Burgundy" or "American Cabernet Sauvignon," and each section is introduced by a paragraph or two of informative history of the region and its wines, highlights of distinguishing characteristics and specialties of the region or grape, and a few food-

"We believe that no dish can be better than its ingredients, and that the best ingredients are usually local. Freshness is ephemeral and geography expresses itself in the taste of the food sometimes subtly and sometimes profoundly.

The foods and wines of our region share a similar motherhood of soil and weather, making for happier culinary marriages than those from dissimilar climates.

The Herbfarm believes that chefs who cook with local ingredients, season by season, year after year, develop a more complete understanding of their foods than chefs who do not. This understanding can give rise to greater expressions of the food, its preparation, and enjoyment. The Herbfarm believes that supporting local farmers, foragers, cheesemakers, wineries, and fishermen helps preserve and promote the foundation of regional cuisines.

Because The Herbfarm showcases the foods of the Northwest, we believe that the wines of this region are typically the best accompaniments to the flavors of the foods on our menus. Therefore, we do our best to secure the finest and most interesting wines from the 700 wineries within a day's drive. We define our region as from the Russian River in California to British Columbia to the north, and from Puget Sound and the Willamette Valley in the west to the high vineyards of Idaho to the east. Our cellar of more than 19,000 bottles encompasses what is most likely America's largest selection of Northwest wines, as well as many rare and hard-to-find bottles from throughout the world."

In Their Own Words

Ron Zimmerman

THE HERBFARM



SHOWCASE: The Herbfarm knows how to merchandise wine throughout its space.

THE BEST WINE LISTS IN AMERICA

matching suggestions. This is concluded with an inspirational wine quote from a famous historical figure.

The descriptions are basic primers that capture the essence of the category and empower less experienced wine drinkers to try something they may not have had before. They also convey a sense that this is a very well-thought-out and carefully selected list that lets diners feel confident that they can't go wrong with any selection. This is particularly important in an upscale restaurant setting because it sets the tone that there are no stuffy rules, just fun and pleasure. Kudos to such a world-famous, high-end restaurant that can create this kind of approachable wine atmosphere.

Another feature that really impressed the judges was Trotter's amazing examples of food and wine pairing in the ongoing wine degustation menus. The combination of the hyper-creative food and ultra-exotic wines, each tailored to a particular "food theme" or customer preference, creates an opportunity for what may well be an amazing dining experience.

Going beyond the call of duty, Trotter will even adjust his regular menu on the fly to suit the wine choices of his

guests—another rare treat that proves a total commitment to his customers and the ultimate food and wine experience.

One thing that many of the wine list winners shared was a well-planned and inviting wine dinner program. Whether it was monthly wine and food tasting menus, wine dinners with the winemakers, or more educational food and wine events, the ability to engage, entertain, and educate diners with special wine events creates excitement and interest in your restaurant that will pay you back many times the additional costs.

In Their
Own Words
**Charlie
Trotter**

CHARLIE TROTTER'S

"First and foremost, our wine list provides choices to complement our cuisine. The strong sections of the list include Burgundy, Bordeaux and California, as well as other major regions of the world. It balances between the great vintages of classic regions, to unknown, small-production wineries, sure to be future stars. Throughout the wine list we have included informative descriptions of regions, grape varieties and producers. Some of the highlights of our wine program include:

- 20 vintages of Penfolds "Grange" dating back to 1955, plus 6 vintages in Magnums
- 12 vintages of Grace Family Vineyards Cabernet
- 18 selections of Angelo Gaja beginning with the 1961 Barbaresco
- 24 selections of single vineyard Cote Roties from Guigal Classic Bordeaux, including 1865 Lafite, 1870 Lafite in 750 ml. and Magnum, 1900 Lafite and Margaux, 1900 La Mission Haut Brion in Magnum, and 1921 Petrus in Magnum
- Chateau d'Yquem dating back to 1857 and 1859
- Magnum of 1945 Romanee-Conti
- 23 selections of Henry Mayer, including 8 vintages of Eschezeaux, starting in 1982.
- More than 48 selections from Domaine Leroy, including the 1949 Musigny
- More than 130 selections in large formats, including 12 vintages of La Jota Imperials starting in 1982.
- 9 Double Magnums of Angelo Gaja's Barbarescos
- Imperial of 1990 Penfolds "Grange," one of 5 Imperials of Grange ever made.
- Entire section celebrating Oregon Pinot Noir, including 11 vintages of Eyrie "Reserve" dating back to 1975
- Entire section of the list devoted to wine \$75 or less which contains over 200 wines
- Entire section of the list devoted to wines from North America
- A selection of nearly 100 half bottles
- A wine degustation menu, above and beyond our wines by the glass, which includes a different wine paired with each course of our menu
- A non-alcoholic degustation menu for those guests who choose



CHILLIN': Charlie Trotter relaxes in his wine cellar.

not to drink alcohol. These are fruit and/or vegetable blends, infusions or juices

- A complete and regularly updated wine list on our website.

A unique quality of Charlie Trotter's is that we will tailor a menu to complement each guest's wine selection. Our Vegetable and Grand Tasting Menus are white-wine friendly for the first savory courses, while the following savory courses of each menu are best paired with red wines.

Should a guest prefer a full-bodied red wine at the start of their evening—such as a Bordeaux or California Cabernet—they will be given the option to allow our chefs to spontaneously create a menu that will enhance their wine selection. Such flexibility is unheard of at most other restaurants.

In order to heighten our guests' experiences we employ three, full-time sommeliers allowing for one sommelier per 25-30 guests. Each sommelier has passed the Advanced Sommelier Level from Court of the Master Sommeliers, and we also have several members of the staff that have passed the Certificate Level from the Court. In order to educate the staff about food and wine pairing, wine regions and grape varieties, the sommeliers hold weekly tastings and discussions with the staff."

“In 1998 we decided to develop a wine program that clearly emphasized Mediterranean flavors that complement our food. A majority of the selections had to be value-driven. We wanted the program to be serious enough for the wine cognoscenti, but also user-friendly and fun.



In 1998 we felt that too many of us in the business were making limiting assumptions about what Portlanders would be willing to try. We wanted to show our guests the wines from the South of France, Italy, and Spain, as well as Portugal, and Greece. We sought out wines that were meant for food; were relatively inexpensive and gave a sense of place. This strategy didn't mean that the wine couldn't be big or powerful, it just meant that it couldn't overwhelm the dishes we offered.

We wanted people to enjoy a good wine and food match and consider buying a second bottle.

Generally, we offer wines with higher acidity, wines that emphasize terroir and well-integrated flavors with limited new oak or no oak at all. We look for Mediterranean flavors, not just Mediterranean wines. That means we can add Rhone-style and Italian varietal wines from California, as well as wines from New Zealand, Australia, and South

Africa, plus a few from the Loire Valley, Alsace, Germany and Austria. We also look for “cutting-edge” wines that are unfamiliar to the general public, but ones a wine aficionado would recognize and want to taste. We realize that some people might not care that much about wine and we want to be able to give them something with familiar flavors that just plain tastes good without sacrificing integrity.

Even though someone might not know a particular wine, they can get a pretty good idea of some of its basic characteristics from where that wine is grouped on the list and where it falls within a category. Listing by style has proven to be extremely effective. People have learned how to get around our list.

About a year ago we made some significant changes to our “wine by style” format by including the primary grape varieties with each bottled listed. This removed the last element of “fear” that held people back from buying a wine that was listed only by appellation and style. Once they knew with certainty what they were drinking, they were much more willing to experiment. (It also increased server confidence). In addition, we broadened each category, but included more information on style and where each wine fit within the group. We also offered two other categories of wine listed separately. The first was a list that sells for \$25 and the second was an eclectic list that appealed to the “early adapters” that come to Southpark regularly for the latest release. The result has been a dramatic increase in sales in a restaurant that already had wine sales that were the envy of many.”

In Their Own Words
Karin Devencenzi
David Holstrom

SOUTHPARK SEAFOOD
GRILL & WINE BAR



USER-FRIENDLY: Southpark's wine list is serious, but fun.

US Wine Bonds

The Northwest-focused wine list at the Herbfarm is a truly amazing thing. And not just because it's a great wine list, but because it is a great wine book! We never would have believed it, but we found ourselves unable to put it down because it was so fascinating and informative to read. Almost every page is filled with tasteful photographs and illuminating mini-bios of featured winemakers and wineries. And not just press kit material of famous big wineries that you could get from your wine distributor, but well-researched and seemingly original written expositions of winemakers at wineries big, small and even extinct.

The feeling you get looking at this list is that there is a lot about Northwest wines that you don't know, but it's okay because this restaurant really knows these wines and the winemakers. You get a sense from the Herbfarm's wine list that it cares tremendously about the wines from its region, not just because the restaurant is located there, but because its philosophy of food and wine is simply that local wines are the best compliment to cuisine prepared with fresh local ingredients.

It's refreshing to see such a philosophy executed without compromise in such a stylish, intelligent, and comprehensive way through a wine list. Even if you go into the Herbfarm questioning or disagreeing with the local-food-with-local-wine thesis at the core of this restaurant, it's likely that you will come out, at a bare minimum, with a great meal and lot of respect for the conviction with which they pursue this tenet. More likely you will become an instant convert. And if you don't, it also offers a fantastic selection of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Rhone, Italian, Australian, Spanish and California Cabernet-based wines. You are bound to find something you like.

The Herbfarm offers an incredible wine list, one of the best we've ever seen. Even the most seasoned wine expert would find new information and obscure wines that they have never tried. And for the neophyte, it's like the map of a wine amusement park—everything looks incredibly fun and inviting. The lesson here is that doing your homework, following your culinary convictions, and being creative, detailed, and informative with your list will captivate and inspire you customer to have some great and unique (maybe even local) bottles of wine with their meal. We wondered, however, if the wine list was so captivating that people would spend the whole evening just reading it! But, a quick look at the Herbfarm's wine sales figures of 30% of the bottom line assured us that a lot of wine was being discovered and sold.

Short But Not Forgotten

The short list category is for wine lists with fewer than 100 selections. This category would include the largest group of restaurants in the country and, for this reason, the lessons learned from the short-list winners are probably the most applicable for the broadest range of restaurants. Among the entrants, we saw a lot of smaller Italian restaurants with lots of Italian wines on their lists. This is good and to be expected. The problem with many was that the lists were serviceable,

THE BEST WINE LISTS IN AMERICA

but did not display much creativity or originality, either in the selection of the wines or presentation of the list. Some were obviously influenced by distributors looking to “move some wine” and didn’t have a distinctive selection or original point of view that customers could get into.

The winners of the short list category and particularly the 1st place winner, Southpark Seafood Grill, explored a diverse and exciting range of wines within a fun and creative presentation. The Southpark list was last year’s winner and it remains head and shoulders above the competition this year.

It is, in short, a wine poem from the restaurant to the customer. The defining characteristic of this poem is that it adroitly communicates to the customer how to order wine through brief food-and-flavor-based descriptions and organization. It does this by first organizing the wines into broad categories of style: “Modern, New World Style Whites-Rounded, Rich Fruit” or “European Style Reds that Show Fidelity to the Soil.”

Then, within these styles, it gives a carefully selected and geographically diverse set of choices from generally smaller and

How We Judge Wine Lists

After sorting the entries by size and category, all were screened to remove the lists that did not meet a few basic entry standards. Wine lists removed at this stage of the judging were either very poorly written or had serious technical flaws. (Many of the entries eliminated at this stage didn’t include vintages, for example.)

The remaining entries were then individually reviewed and points were awarded for seven criteria:

1. Overall Wine Selection - We were looking for lists that chose the best examples in any given style and price point. We wanted to see a thoughtful selection of quality wines and not a wine list driven by price point and category decisions.

2. Variety in Style and Brands - We were looking for diverse lists with a wide selection of styles, producers and regions. (One restaurant had a large selection of wines from one or two “mega-producers” and their families of imported wines. From the looks of the wine list this wasn’t just a monthly special. Sweet-heart deals with one or two suppliers are not in the interest of the consumer.)

3. Fair Pricing and Value Options - We looked at each list to see if the pricing was fair for the consumer, with reasonable markups taken. (We took into consideration the higher prices and excessive taxes that restaurants face in some states.) We also looked at each list to see if there were a few inexpensive but decent alternatives for price-conscious diners.

4. Compatibility with the Menu - A wine list with an exclusive focus on First Growth Bordeaux can be awe-inspiring, but it is strangely out of place in a fish house. No matter how large the wine list, each and every wine should be chosen because it complements the restaurant’s food, and for no other reason. Entries that didn’t include a menu (as requested on the entry application) weren’t eliminated, but no points could be awarded for menu compatibility.

5. Presentation - Your wine list speaks for your restaurant. Make sure that it is neat, well-organized, and looks professionally laid-out.

6. Extras - Wines from unique regions, availability of half bottles, tasting notes, and other well-thought-out extras were noted and awarded points.

7. Overall Impression - A good wine list should encourage consumers to explore new wines. It should be interesting to read. Ultimately we were looking for creativity and imagination. A boring wine list isn’t a great wine list.

Based on these seven criteria, both the Beverage Testing Institute staff and a select panel of restaurant and wine professionals reviewed the top quarter of entries. From these reviews we selected the winners in RESTAURANT HOSPITALITY’S BEST WINE LISTS IN AMERICA COMPETITION.



BUCOLIC: The Herb Farm is a wine-lover’s dream.

lesser-known producers starting with lighter wine and progressing to richer wines. The wines names are supplemented by the grape varietal names so that people, who don’t know the European nomenclature, can find the wine grape they like to drink. This is a good idea that others should follow. Lesson: the easier that you can make it to order the wine, the better.

Speaking of easy ordering, it takes real guts to have a short wine list without a lot of big, well-known, volume brands. What you’re saying to customer is that you are not painting your list by the numbers; that you are tasting a lot of wines to find the best fit for your menu; and that you don’t care if the wine’s name is instantly recognized. You know the wines are exceptional and if you present them as informatively and creatively as Southpark has, you will create an atmosphere of curiosity and exploration. Your customers will learn to trust your selections and buy more wine—maybe even more expensive wine.

In addition to the list’s economical and illustrative organization, there are other creative flourishes. Sections of “Terrific Wines You’ve Never Heard Of” and “Everyday Wine Snob Corner”; multi-national wine flight explorations of a single grape (fun!); and numerous special selections “that may result in extreme euphoria.” The latter are accompanied by colorful, paragraph-long descriptions that delight the imagination and entice the palate. Throughout the list, you get the sense that they are having a good time and they want you to have fun, too. All this is accomplished in only two single-sided oversized pages. Amazing!

In summary, we found that a collection of famous wines is not necessarily the same thing as a great wine list. You must find a diverse assortment of well-known and unique wines that work brilliantly with your cuisine and will appeal to a broad range of customer tastes. This is the starting point. A great wine list, through its presentation, elaboration, and style, will illuminate these remarkable wines and invite guests to have great experiences. The fine balance between matching a menu with a focused diversity of wines, price, style, and presentation is what makes a wine list great. It’s also what separates restaurants with 10-15% of their total f&b sales in wine from those with 20%, 30%, 40%, and even higher.

We congratulate this year’s winners and hope that the ideas and principles expounded by their hard work will benefit you. **R**