



A TRULY GREAT WINE LIST SHOULD BE **DRINKABLE & PROFITABLE**

It's All in the Mix

by Meg Houston Maker

A GREAT WINE LIST IS A BIT LIKE A GREAT dance playlist. It mixes classics with new beats, funk with experimental pop. There are beloved oldies plus mysteries to discover. And it's all danceable, all drinkable.

But a truly great wine list must be both drinkable *and* profitable. How should a wine director adjust the mix to assure success while also winning guests' hearts?

Start with the big picture, says Geoff Kruth, MS, Wine Director at Farmhouse Inn and COO of the Guild of Sommeliers. "You should think of the average customer and the average staff member in that restaurant. Those things have to match. If you hire some consultant to put an obscure wine list together, with a staff that doesn't know how to sell it and a customer base that's not interested, you're wasting time and money."

June Rodil, MS, Beverage Director for seven different properties in Austin, agrees. "I think you've got to look at the concept and goals of the restaurant as a whole," she says. At June's, a wine bar, her list turns frequently. It's made to be hand-sold. At Perla's, a busy oyster bar with no floor somm, the mix must be based on easygoing standards.

Pricing must match the concept, too. It can't float too high in casual neighborhood bistros with repeat guests. Fine dining? Resort hotel?



June Rodil, MS oversees restaurant wine lists for several venues in Austin. Here she is at June's All Day, the newest restaurant from McGuire Moorman Hospitality.

Different story. Daniel Toral, Wine Director of 50 Eggs in Miami, says, “Our food prices are friendly, everyday. So in pricing a list we want to make sure we’re pricing for everyday drinkers.”

In particular, think carefully about the pricing of familiar blue chip brands like Wente, Jordan, Far Niente, Duckhorn or Cakebread. They act like the list’s “top hits” for many guests, and their pricing can lead to assumptions about both markup and value proposition. “A certain percentage of people will look at benchmark wines,” says Kruth. “What does Clicquot Yellow Label cost? What does Silver Oak cost?”

Of course, guests’ generalized assumptions about markup can be dead wrong, especially with scaled pricing, or when one part of the program props another: Jon McDaniel, of LessLaw Hospitality in Chicago, says, “I can sell the Jordan Chardonnay at 60 bucks—as opposed to 90, which you’ll find on some steakhouse menus—because I’m balancing that out with my by-the-glass program.” It’s a common strategy; Toral uses BTG to prop Champagne, “because I want to make sure people drink it all the time.”

Damien Wilson, Ph.D., Chair of Wine Business at Sonoma State University, offered the economist’s perspective on this phenomenon. “Diners are concerned about balancing the social risk of choosing an acceptable wine with the financial risk of paying too much,” he says. “So, they tend to look over a list for any wine they’re familiar with, and use that price as a reference. If they don’t see anything they know, they default to the cheapest of whatever passes as acceptable”—not exactly the best result for either the guest or the house.

So the presence of familiar wines is helpful, but many somms also love hand-sell wines—and the adventurous guests who gravitate toward them. Some directors might consider dropping old standards altogether to encourage experimentation. Research seems to suggest the opposite.

“Ironically, a wine list full of obscurities may well have been developed to compel the diner to go outside of their comfort zone, but mainly encourages a ‘safe’ choice,” says Wilson. Evidently, the mere presence of recognizable options seems to put guests at ease, which in turn makes them more receptive to outliers.

In other words, a list that includes a mix of old standards and new favorites, plus a few unicorns, will encourage adventurous guests to experiment while giving traditionalists reliable options. “Set up your wine list to help diners become confident in making a decision,” Wilson says, and “provide enough of what they know to enable them to extend beyond their comfort zone.”



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Damien Wilson, Ph.D., Chair of Wine Business at Sonoma State University offers, “Listing familiar brands makes the customer more confident in their selection, which encourages experimentation. The more familiar the customer is with any decision, the more likely they are to innovate.”