



Redefining Prestige

THE RIGHT WINE PROGRAM, HOWEVER SMALL, IS NEVER INCOMPATIBLE WITH PROFIT

ROY'S RESTAURANTS, WHERE I was a founding partner and served as VP/corporate wine director, garnered its share of national "best of" awards. After earning one such accolade for our wine program in 1992, my phone rang in the middle of a family dinner. It was the editor of the country's biggest consumer wine magazine calling to ask, "If your wine list is that good, why haven't you been submitting it to our annual grand awards?"

I don't recall exactly what I said, but it probably went like this: "Your grand awards reward the biggest wine lists with the largest number of prestige wines. Our wine list is the exact opposite—we keep it as small as possible, with the smallest amount of classic or prestigious wines. Instead, we go for wines that go best with our food. In terms of quality, it's mostly about originality or winemakers who prioritize balance or sense of place. But if you change your criteria to be more like ours, I'd be happy to enter our list!" He said thanks and hung up. A few months later, our families sat down to a nice dinner in a restaurant on Maui together—no hard feelings.

This is not meant to be critical of restaurants that do chase such awards. To each their own. It's not so much the decisions you make as the way you execute them. Our strategy worked for us because we relied on our own definition of prestige—which, I can tell you from experience, needn't be incompatible with profit.

To that end, we turned the concept of the "prestige wine list" inside out. Rather than carry monthly inventories in excess of \$100,000 and expecting to post at least \$50,000 in monthly sales, we preferred to carry monthly inventories of less than \$25,000 while selling more than \$50,000. Turning over your inventory two, three, or more times each month is, obviously, preferable to settling for sales amounting to just a small percentage of your standing inventory. I know it can be done because we did it.

In that light, I would argue that it is not how many wines you sell, it's the quality of the wines you sell. If you're like me, when handed a big wine list in a restaurant, you make it your mission to sift through all the pages to find the few offerings that are truly exciting or

momentous. What if you were to make it your mission as a restaurant manager to dispense with all those pages and create a wine list that *only* lists wines that are fantastically original and go perfectly with the food you serve? That is what a great, small, profit-driven list is all about: cutting the wheat from the chaff well before a guest walks through the door.

I used to say this kind of program takes courage. Increasingly, at a perilous time for restaurants, it is more like survival instinct for sommeliers who are able to check their egos at the door. You don't need to compile a gigantic, massively expensive cellar; instead, you can expand your self-education by implementing a program based upon flexibility, constant change, and creativity, just as good chefs do. I promise you, it's very satisfying.

Finally, one of the most underrated benefits of a small, disciplined wine program: It is far easier to train staff on fewer than 100 wines than on thousands of them. This aspect of restaurant management never changes—the smarter the team, the bigger the sales, and the more wowed the guests. **SJ**