



HOW TO GET THE BEST OUT OF A SOMMELIER

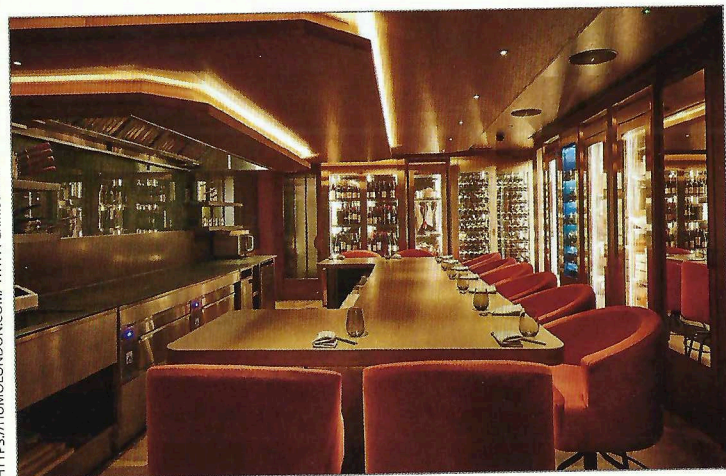


I know some outstanding sommeliers, who understand their wines, craft excellent lists that go well with the styles of food on the menu and are truly helpful to their customers. However, in my experience, these are sadly few and far between. Too many sommeliers in the UK are supercilious, more interested in showing off their purported knowledge, and apparently focused only on maximising profits. Although numerous sommeliers hold various levels of the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET) exams, and some have also earned the prestigious Master Sommelier qualification, it is remarkable how few ever visit the vineyards and really get to know wine growers on home ground. Poor sommeliers do more harm than good to the reputation of the profession. Cherish the good ones!

Two recent experiences highlight the problem, one at a Michelin two starred restaurant, and the other at a prestigious

London Club. At the first, I explained that we only wanted one bottle of wine between us because I was driving and my two guests did not want to drink much, but the sommelier insisted on immediately bringing the champagne trolley to the table, trying to persuade us to have glasses of ridiculously over priced champagne while choosing from the menu. Then, when the menu came, he waxed eloquently, or so he thought, on what wines (in the plural) we should have with each course, and showed little interest in actually helping me choose a single bottle of wine to go with the diverse plates that my guests were choosing! At the second, a London Club, the sommelier, full of his own importance, regularly spilt the wine over the table when trying to fill my glass and never apologised. Perhaps I had offended him in some way.

Here then are some simple tips for managing sommeliers and trying to get the best out of them as a customer. First, always be polite, even when you think they are not being so. Retain the moral high ground, and don't let their perceived arrogance or stupidity spoil your enjoyment of a meal. Second, let the sommelier know your own preferences, and whether you would like to go with a similar wine, or are interested in exploring something



EXCELLENT SOMMELIERS CAN BE FOUND!

new. Third, try asking them what their own favourite wines are on their list. This can open up an interesting conversation, especially if you happen to know one of the wines, or at least another wine from the same region so you can then compare notes. This can also show the sommelier that you know something about wine, which will usually lead to better service. Fourth, don't be shy about setting yourself a maximum price, and asking what they would recommend at that level. Don't let them persuade you to go above it! Fifth, understand that their behaviour may not actually be their own fault – most sommeliers are paid to maximise their establishment's income from wine. Sixth, if you don't think a wine is quite right, don't be wary about asking the sommelier whether they think it is as it should be. There are now very few flawed wines in restaurants, but a quick smell of the "pouring taste" should provide the opportunity for such a conversation before proceeding.

If all else fails, simply say that you would like a nice bottle of sparkling water, because your focus is on the food not the wine. That way, you should avoid having to deal with the sommelier for the entirety of the meal. But don't say you don't drink alcohol because you will then be burdened with a eulogy on their non/low-alcohol wines! You could always just stay at home and choose a good value local supermarket wine from the list below at a fraction of the price!

GOOD VALUE SUPERMARKET AND LOCAL WINES *(please drink responsibly)*

LOCAL FAVOURITES

Esulé, Redheads Cabernets (McLaren Vale, South Australia) 2023, 14.5%. The label of this "outcast" wine may not please your sommelier! Deep, dark Cabernet Sauvignon characteristics, enriched with aromatic Cabernet Franc; blackcurrant, blackberry, cedar and

slight spicy notes (Laitwhaites, £30, **reduced to £25 if you bring a copy of this magazine**).

Terre di Faiano, Nero di Troia IGP (Puglia, Italy) 2024, 13%. Made by Orion, this elegant organic wine, 30% of which is aged in new American barriques, has flavours of dark plums and cinnamon with notes of tobacco and pepper (Sainsbury's, £8.75 with Nectar).

SLIGHTLY FURTHER AFIELD

Mount Difficulty, Roaring Meg Pinot Noir (Otago, South Island New Zealand/Aotearoa) 2023, 14%. A delicious light Pinot Noir made for drinking young, from one of my favourite New Zealand wineries. Ripe raspberry and cherry flavours with a touch of soft spiciness (Majestic, £21.50 mixed six, **reduced to £20.50 mixed six if you bring a copy of this magazine**).

Félix Solís Mucho Mas White (Spain) non vintage, 12.5%. Félix Solís was recently ranked sixth in the top 100 Best Wineries of the World. This pale straw-coloured wine is a tasty blend of Verdejo, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, with quite rich peach, apricot and citrus characteristics (Tesco, £7.25 for Clubcard holders).

Cave de Lugny, Macon-Villages, Chardonnay (Burgundy) 2024, 13%.

Classic good value Southern Burgundy Chardonnay, characterised by its strong minerality with a touch of peach and citrus notes (Morrison's, £11 with More Card).

Bowler and Broly English Pinot Noir Rosé (England) 2024, 13%. Made for Aldi by Lyme Bay Winery, this is the best value English rosé – perfect if you just want to take something English and pink with you for a fun day out (Aldi £8.99, currently reduced from £10.99).

(Wine prices and availability correct at going to press, but are subject to change at short notice)

Next issue: The Southern Rhône

