

Biography of a Wine List

Every restaurant wine program has a backstory and a life cycle



Restaurant Mosaic in Pretoria, South Africa. (Marsel Roothman)



By Gillian Sciaretta

■ From the Aug 31, 2018, issue

Every wine list tells a story, and one that, like life, evolves over time. A confluence of factors can influence its development—the preferences of the diners, the ideology of the sommeliers, the wine crazes of the day. But consumer tastes change, sommeliers move on, and new trends are born. Wine lists must keep pace, or risk becoming obsolete.

Many *Wine Spectator* Restaurant Award recipients have been in our program for years, even decades. Some of these cellars chart a steady course, reliably offering tried-and-true wine selections. Others are

continuously scouting new discoveries. Whatever the approach, these restaurants share a commitment to maintaining stellar wine programs across the ebb and flow of time.

Element 47, located in the Little Nell hotel in Aspen, Colo., has held the Grand Award, our highest honor for a wine list, since 1997. This feat has depended on a relay race of passionate wine directors, each in turn upholding the caliber of Element's cellar.

When the restaurant first achieved the Grand Award, Bobby Stuckey, now owner of Best of Award Excellence winner Frasca in Boulder, Colo., was the young, 28-year-old wine director. "Earning the Grand Award was such a big deal for the whole hotel. It was so awesome," Stuckey recalls. But it took a couple of years after Stuckey first arrived in 1995 for him to get the cellar to the level he wanted.

"The wine program when I started there was run by a gentleman who just passed away last year, Mark Pape," Stuckey explains. "[The wine list] was really deep in Bordeaux and California, but this was the mid-'90s and that's what the jam was."

In order to "breathe some fresh air" into the wine program, Stuckey added domaine Burgundy, boutique California, and Italian wines. "I look back so fondly," he says. "Like, Piedmont was having its renaissance then. There were so many things going on that we could work on. We were able to build an all-world list."

Stuckey departed the hotel in 2000, leaving behind a 1,000-selection wine list with 15,000 bottles in inventory. His replacement was Richard Betts, who was followed in 2009 by Jonathan Pullis. Today's leader of the Little Nell's wine program is Carlton McCoy, who joined the wine team there in 2010 and became wine director in 2013. Like Stuckey, McCoy made changes to keep up with the times.

"When I arrived, the wine list was Burgundy-heavy, which was obviously a sommelier's dream, but if you had guests that wanted to spend money on Bordeaux, the Rhône Valley or Tuscany, there weren't as many options," McCoy says, "I have a pretty unique philosophy on what it means to be a Grand Award program. It's all about diversity and offering great experiences for the guest."

To diversify the list, McCoy chipped away at the Burgundy inventory and invested heavily in Rhône wines, top Bordeaux, Tuscany, and domestic Cabernet, Syrah and Pinot Noir. The list currently offers 2,700 selections (with 22,000 bottles in support) and can claim strength in Burgundy, Bordeaux, California, Rhône, Italy and Germany.

"I don't want someone to look at the wine list and say, 'Oh, Carlton was the wine director then.' Then I think I failed," McCoy says. And he takes pride in shaping the education program he has built for his team, which includes complimentary weekly wine classes. In his view, a wine list lives through the people who activate it.

"I think when you come to a property that has a Grand Award, it's not just about a book with a bunch of wines in it. It's really about the experience. To make sure the guests have a great wine experience, the staff has to be super-competent and very knowledgeable about wine."

The *Wine Spectator* Restaurant Awards program, introduced in 1981, is now in its 38th year of honoring restaurants with serious wine programs. In 2018, 3,759 restaurants from around the world earned awards for their wine lists.

Each applicant's list is carefully judged for one of three awards: the Award of Excellence, the Best of Award of Excellence or the Grand Award. This year, award winners came from all 50 states and more than 75 countries and territories.

The Award of Excellence is given to restaurants whose wine lists offer a well-chosen selection of quality producers along with a thematic match to the menu in both price and style. Ranging in size from 90 selections to several hundred, these lists are well-focused and tend to emphasize discovery. This year, 2,453 restaurants achieved the Award of Excellence.

The Best of Award of Excellence, granted to 1,215 restaurants in 2018, honors wine programs that take their commitment a step further to display excellent breadth across multiple regions and/or significant vertical depth of top wines, along with superior presentation. Typically offering 350 or more wine selections, these restaurants are destinations for serious wine lovers, showing a deep involvement with wine both in the cellar and on the part of the service team.

Cherry Circle Room, located in the Chicago Athletic Association hotel, opened in 2015 and earned the Best of Award of Excellence the very next year for its 385-selection wine program. Today, the wine list has more than tripled its offerings, which now number 1,300 selections.

"The wine list was meant to be tiny," admits wine director Andrew Algren, who was previously a sommelier at the city's Alinea. "It was going to be a hundred-bottle list with everything rotating constantly."

Algren's inspiration for the wine selections came from original menus used at the Chicago Athletic Association in the early 1900s. "At that time in the United States, there was a big emphasis on French wine and then American imitations of French wine," he explains. Algren focused on Burgundy, Bordeaux, Champagne and German Rieslings, which more than a century ago were called "Rhine wines."

What's behind the extraordinary uptick in the number of choices? "I feel like I am a horrible collector," Algren laughs. "I continue to just grab more and more things. I think there's a perfect wine for every moment." Champagne and German Riesling, personal favorites of his, are prominent

on the list, but other strengths include Burgundy, California, Italy, Loire and Oregon.

Even so, Algren's vision for the three-year-old wine program is not yet complete. "I'm really excited to continue growing the list wherever I can," he says. "Especially the older, classically styled American selections, such as Stag's Leap Cask 23 1984, Beringer Knights Valley Cabernet 1980 and 1978 Beaulieu Georges de Latour. I have the opportunity to rediscover stuff like that."

For many restaurants, however, it's more difficult to source rare wines, or their guests' wine preferences aren't as varied, resulting in a different approach in the cellar.

The Parson's Table, an Award of Excellence winner since 2003, is located in Little River, S.C., about 120 miles up the coast from Charleston. Situated in what was once the Little River Methodist Church, built in 1885, the restaurant was passed down to executive chef and owner Ed Murray Jr. from his parents in 2001. "My father was the old-school wine jug kind of guy. He said to me, 'You've got Champagne taste, son,' so I started growing the wine list," Murray says.

The list had a humble beginning. "It was one page. Woodbridge was our house wine, and we were using just one vendor." In addition, Murray had to make sure not to stray too far from the California-wine preferences of his guests.

The initial challenge was getting wine vendors to travel from Charleston to Little River. "One way I got around that was whatever wine was allocated into the state, I would buy a case and make that investment. I knew if I didn't, there was a good chance I wasn't going to have it in two months," Murray says.

Over the years, the program grew and evolved. Today, the 235- selection list, while still California-driven, offers solid diversity and great value, which pleases Murray's guests, who are more adventurous in their wine selections than ever, he says.

"The biggest update now is the breadth of wines I have on the list from different regions of the world," Murray notes. "I offer a Priorat. Ten years ago people wouldn't know what the heck that was. Now I am buying a case of it every couple of weeks."

Diners' increasing desire to explore is fueling wine lists all over the world. The number of award winners is growing even in countries where wine is considered an underdog. Mexico (61 winners), United Arab Emirates (16), Poland (18) and Ireland (9) have all achieved their highest number of winners to date.

"The wine scene in Ireland has changed hugely in the past 20 years," says Ian Brosnan, who is wine director for Best of Award of Excellence-winning Ely Wine Bar and Award of Excellence winner Ely Bar & Grill, both in Dublin. In Ireland, beer accounts for 46 percent of all alcohol sales, according to the Irish Wine Association, but the country's wine scene is slowly gaining traction, with wine consumption currently just shy of 28 percent of sales.

"Most wine drinkers 20 years ago were very traditional and conservative in their tastes; it was all about the 'classics'—Sancerre and Chablis for whites, and probably Bordeaux for reds," explains Brosnan. "Skip forward a generation and we have a far more diverse wine-drinking population."

The wine program at Ely Wine Bar has been a trailblazer since the establishment's opening in 1999, when it offered an 80-selection by-the-glass list, then unprecedented for the area. Today, Brosnan's 475-bottle list, still in tandem with a diverse by-the-glass program, boasts strengths in

Burgundy, Bordeaux and other regions of France, as well as Italy and Australia.

"The way we buy wine is changing too," Brosnan adds. "In the past, supermarket selections limited what wines were available to us. The boom in independent wineshops, and more recently, the wine bar-wineshop crossover, are presenting us with wines which would never be found on a supermarket shelf, constantly broadening our wine horizons."

For seven restaurants, the story of their wine list can now include earning the Grand Award.

As our program's highest honor, the Grand Award is presented to restaurants that show uncompromising devotion to the quality of their wine programs. These wine lists, which typically count 1,000 or more selections, deliver serious breadth of top producers and outstanding depth in mature vintages, along with a selection of large-format bottles.

In addition to pitch-perfect harmony with the menu and superior presentation, these programs are supported by the highest level of wine service. All candidates for the Grand Award are inspected by *Wine Spectator* to evaluate the cellar and confirm that the overall dining experience is world-class.

These seven restaurants make up the Grand Award class of 2018. They join the 84 Grand Award winners that successfully renewed their titles this year. The new winners are Ai Fiori in New York City; Barolo Grill in Denver; Le Coureur des Bois in Beloeil, Québec; Madera in Menlo Park, Calif.; Metropolitan Grill in Seattle; Restaurant Mosaic in Pretoria, South Africa; and Sistina in New York City. Their profiles begin on page 68.

To discover thousands more exciting wine programs, turn to our Dining Guide, beginning on page 91, organized by state and country. Visit Restaurants.WineSpectator.com year-round to find news from our award

winners, and download our Restaurant Awards app, available on iTunes, to access recommendations on the go.

Each of this year's 3,759 award-winning wine lists has its own story to tell. But their common purpose of bringing pleasure to wine lovers links them all together.