

It's all in the service



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

There are very few truly specialist positions in the wine trade. Firstly, there is the viticulturist, an agronomist specializing in wine grapes. Then there is the winemaker, the "chef," turning the precious grapes into even more precious wine. Finally there is the sommelier, a professional wine waiter and so much more, who is the front man when wine is opened and enjoyed.

In the wine business the winery owners or winemakers are the usual superstars. The people I most admire are the sommeliers, those who operate in the restau-

rant situation. In fact, this was my entry into the wine trade. The holy trinity of wine, food and company is essential if wine is to be truly enjoyed as it should be, and the restaurant is where wine appears at its best. The sommelier is the expert who brings the aspects together.

I suppose the cupbearer in the biblical story of Joseph was the first recorded sommelier. King David had a wine cellar so extensive, he had a person designated to manage it, but wine service really dates back to Greek and Roman times. The word "sommelier" comes from *sommier*, one who was responsible for transporting goods on animals. Only later was the word "sommelier" associated with wine.

SERGE DUBS represents the best of the old school. (Photos: Courtesy)

In the early days the sommelier was a failed chef, who ended up with what was regarded as the more unsatisfactory position of tending the wines. The traditional view of a sommelier is an imposing figure, probably French, with a short black jacket, black apron, a large sommelier pin in the lapel, a silver *tastevin* (a shallow tasting cup) on a chain and a haughty, superior attitude.

The sommelier as a figure of respect came to the fore in the second half of the 20th century. Fast-forward to today, and the sommelier may be a superstar, no less

famous than the chef.

The modern sommelier is usually more relaxed and informal and far more knowledgeable than the original model. He has to be involved with purchasing, storing and serving wine and beverages. He or she combines the abilities of a restaurant manager, wine waiter, barman, cellar-man and purchasing manager all in one. Many of the best are women. They will have immense wine knowledge, but will also have knowledge of spirits, cocktails, beer, water, soft drinks, coffee, tea, cigars and food. They will purchase wines at all price points, sometimes investing in incredibly expensive wines to be laid down for the future. They have to manage the cellar, ensuring each wine is sold at its best. They have to compile a wine list which must be accurate, legally correct, consistent and informative. They will also set the standards of service, including looking after glassware and decanters, and, dare I say it, will also be responsible for sales.

I WAS delighted to meet Serge Dubs, a French sommelier, who represents the best of the old school. He is a modern-day sommelier set in traditional surroundings. He is sommelier of Auberge de l'III in Illhausern, Alsace. This is a restaurant that has held the exclusive three Michelin stars for 50 years, an incredible achievement.

There is an Israel connection today. In 2017 the restaurant won the award of "Best Wine List in France," and it warmed the cockles of my heart to see three Israeli wines were on this most prestigious wine list. For the record the wines are Yarden Chardonnay 2015, Yarden Syrah 2013 and Yarden ZT 2013. Furthermore, Gamla Chardonnay and Gamla Cabernet Sauvignon were on the special suggestions list.

Dubs was here to act as a judge in the Yarden Award competition and to conduct a workshop. He has his own record of excellence, having won the coveted titles "Best Sommelier in France," "Best Sommelier in Europe" and "Best Sommelier in the World!"

He was fit, bronzed, well kept, trim and immaculately dressed. He was quiet, modest, even charming, only becoming animated when trying to convey a message about service in restaurants. He has a grace and ease of movement that only those who excel in service have. I imagine he glides, rather than walks, across the restaurant floor.

His hobbies are his job, the sommelier profession and the world of wines. No surprise here. With all wine professionals, wine becomes a bit of an obsession. If it isn't, they are in the wrong business. However, he balances this with sports (he was a soccer player), including running, mountain biking and swimming. Suddenly, I understood why he looked so fit.

He frowned on the old, traditional, supercilious image of the French sommelier, and has never used a *tastevin*. Dubs stressed that wine service is not to show off what the sommelier knows. I smiled at this. I believe many wine journalists here love to show off what they know rather than write for the reader.

Dubs said 50% of his job is service. He advised, "never

be pushy." The customer is king and he would do what was necessary to give the guest a good dining experience. If the customer asked for ice in his red wine, he would do it, even if it was against his better instinct. Likewise, if a customer complained that a perfectly good wine was corky (off), he would not hesitate to change it. At the same time, he would try to lead the customers with gentle and tactful persuasion to the direction where they could enjoy the meal more, but the customer's choice, even if misguided, always took preference to what was right.

Dubs said: "Look, listen and try to understand the nuances." He said he is selling happiness as much as wine. He advises young sommeliers not to talk too much. He talks about the ego of some guests that sometimes needs stroking. He admitted sometimes you have to match the wine to the person rather than a specific dish.

The importance of knowing what you have on the wine list is crucial, but it is also important to know what you have in the cellar. His list contains 1,000 wines and his cellar has 65,000 wines in it. Think of the logistics! He changes 25% of the wines two or three times a year. "You must keep the wine list alive," he said.

"Never use your knowledge to show arrogance. Never be pushy. Use knowledge to help communicate," he said. "I learn a lot from customers. A sommelier who is arrogant is afraid and lacks culture. The guest sees the sommelier as someone he can trust. Always serve with finesse, elegance and balance."

Ironic wine educator Kevin Zraly points out: "The sommelier may be the one person who can enliven your meal. He has two advantages: he has tasted all the wines on the wine list and all dishes on the menu." I also liked the quote by Derek Todd: "There is a magic space in that distance between the food and the wine. The ideal match fills that space."

Dubs stressed that his heart sings every time a customer leaves the restaurant happy. Then he smiled wryly and admitted that the sommelier, restaurant staff and kitchen staff also have to be happy. Even the restaurant owner has to be happy, he said.

Of course, the sommelier today may not only be in the restaurant. I sometimes refer to him as "the wine professional outside the gates of the winery," or as "a winemaker in a suit."

I WAS pleased and moved to see the Yarden Award competition take place this year to encourage wine service and wine knowledge. Wine service has always been a baby of mine. In the early 1990s I organized the first-ever sommelier course in Israel. Twenty-four years ago, I brought the concept of this competition to Israel. I had organized similar competitions in England, sponsored by Alexis Lichine, and I figured it was a good idea to encourage the pursuit of excellence in wine service in Israel. The first competition was held in 1994, and it then became an annual event. I continued to run it until I left the Golan Heights Winery in 2002.

The final was held at the Golan Heights Winery. Judges included Dubs, winemaker Victor Schoenfeld,

THE 2018 YARDEN award is presented to sommelier Mor Bernstein, flanked by (left) Yair Shapira, CEO of the Golan Heights Winery and Dubs, who helped judge the competition.



SOMMELIER GAL ZOHAR at work.

sommelier Aviram Katz, now of Basta restaurant in Tel Aviv, and sommelier Gal Zohar of IWSI, the official training representative of WSET in Israel. There were five stations: wine tasting, wine knowledge, viticulture & winemaking, wine service and sparkling & dessert wines.

The winner of the Yarden Award 2018 was Mor Bernstein, the ex-sommelier of Tel Aviv's Jaffa Tel Aviv, Toto and Claro restaurants, and more recently involved at Nono. She is studying for the WSET Diploma, a level

hibits deep knowledge, style and elegance and is the best sommelier of her generation. She is sure of a successful career in wine if she wants it.

I asked Dubs why, after over 40 years as chef sommelier, does he still remain infatuated with the restaurant scene? He said the restaurant is his home and family. He loves the interaction with people, the buzz of service and the theater of the restaurant. He explained he has served three generations of some families, who still return often to see him. Finally, he shrugged, as only a Frenchman can, and said: "Anyway, being a sommelier - it's a way of life!"

The writer has advanced Israeli wines for over 30 years. He is referred to as "the English voice of Israeli wine." www.adammontefiore.com