

## It's all about the service

One does not live on high international standards of food alone



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

**M**y introduction to the R2M corporation was CoffeeBar, its first eatery. It swiftly became one of my favorite restaurants, maintaining high standards year in and year out. Don't be misled by the simple name, or the area in Tel Aviv (on Yad Harutzim Street) where it is situated.

Opened in 1994, it is a restaurant that understands the theater of the restaurant business – combining hospitality and quality food with fiercely good service. Everything is in the right proportion, but not too much. The menu and wine list are always interesting without being pretentious, and the service is always excellent without arrogance. Although it is not necessarily the highest quality in Israel, the overall package gives a fight to any other establishment in Israel. To use a boxing term, pound-for-pound it is one of the best restaurants in Israel.

As customers, my children and I are notoriously hard to please. We don't delight in eating only, but also in analyzing and discussing each course, the wines and service. The dissecting of the whole experience is part

of the fun for us. We have all been in this business, so we do admire standards in others. We can drive our dining companions crazy with this obsession, and sometimes even other family members, including my late wife. "Don't talk about it... just eat" they would say. I digress simply to make the point I am pretty demanding, but even so, it is pretty difficult to leave CoffeeBar without positive feelings.

Apart from CoffeeBar, R2M owns other outlets in Tel Aviv that are close to the best of their type in Israel. There is the Montefiore, a pioneering boutique hotel (great name, by the way! The street where the hotel is situated is named after my relative Moses Montefiore); the Brasserie, a 24/7 operation that imports the French brasserie style as if directly from Paris; the Bakery on Rothschild Boulevard, and finally, the Delicatessen, where you can enjoy one of the best breakfasts in the city. Each of these venues is a totally different concept, but each has set standards for others to try and emulate.

However, I write about wine not restaurants and it is their attitude to wine that I respect so much. The wine selection and the style of the wine list at every venue matches the concept and price, and the variety available is as up-to-date as tomorrow. The choice re-

flects both the needs and perceptions of the customers. They are not wine lists designed solely to impress; they also fit seamlessly into the objectives and theme of the restaurant.

There are no famous sommeliers serving these wines; wine service is done by the servicing waiter. It is all about efficiency and hospitality, yet service is nonetheless of a high standard at all levels.

The group does not have superstars, or PR companies pumping out press releases. The owners and chefs are remarkably low-key. The outlet is the brand.

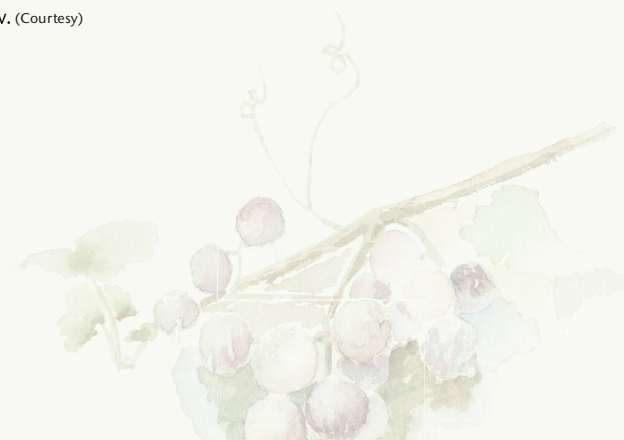
However, this is not exactly true for the person in charge of beverages, who is in fact a kind of superstar. I am referring to Elad Shoham. He is lean and lanky, balding with a newish ginger beard and a permanent quizzical look. Once I was served by him at the Montefiore Hotel, and no doubt he has the languid, fluid economy of movement of someone at ease giving service. Those who are gifted glide unobtrusively.

I remember the first restaurants I visited were Le Manoir aux Quatre Saisons in England, Trotters in the US and Les Crayères in France. The difference between these cathedrals of gastronomy and all the other good and successful places was an elevated, almost uncanny level of service. I often think the food



CHEESE AND wine at the Hotel Montefiore, Tel Aviv. (Courtesy)

**ELAD SHOHAM** – wine enthusiast, sommelier and beverage director – on the move, giving pre-service training. (Courtesy)



in Israel reaches high international standards, but the overall dining experience falls down on service issues.

Shoham is someone who is hyperactive and likes doing. He can barely sit still long enough to speak to me. He is fidgeting, desperate to get back to the action. He tells me he started at McDonald's as a 15-year-old. This was his entry into the pressure cooker of food service. His introduction to fine dining, which changed his outlook and gave him his career, was at Aioli Restaurant. There the foodie in him came out. The world of fine wine and the culinary possibilities opened a window in his mind. At the same time, he did everything and anything in the kitchen or on the floor just to soak up the knowledge and atmosphere of the restaurant business.

At this stage, he was not sure whether he wanted to be in the kitchen, but he began to be entranced by the world of bars, cocktails and wines. In 2004, he joined R2M and developed along with the group. He was part of the kitchen staff of Hotel Montefiore for a while and floor manager of CoffeeBar. Eventually the theater of the restaurant floor, contact with the customer and buzz of service won the day and wine became his new passion. He had the urge to taste, learn about wine, visit wineries, meet winemakers and develop his knowledge. He eventually became the sommelier of

Hotel Montefiore, then wine manager for the group, and more recently was put in charge of all beverages.

APART FROM the wine selection and variety by bottle, glass and magnum, there are three other reasons why I single out R2M as having an enviable wine program. First, the level of wine service is very good and staff knowledge is high. This shows an excellent and ongoing wine training.

Second, there are very few restaurants that have the budgets to buy wines for long-term aging. Everything is immediate. Wine lists change by the day and the days of the telephone book-sized wine list is disappearing. Yet, visit Hotel Montefiore and you have the opportunity to buy different mini verticals (different vintages) of Castel Grand Vin, Clos de Gat Ayalon, Flam Noble, Margalit Cabernet Sauvignon and Yatir Forest. This is virtually unique because the restaurant has to buy wine and store it for the future. In today's restaurant world, fewer and fewer restaurants are prepared to do this.

Then there is Haruzim. This is the house wine of the group. Most restaurants searching for a house wine would select something off the shelf and slap a special personalized label on the bottle. Those with high-

er standards would go to the trouble to taste existing wines and choose their own blend. You would think the Energizer bunny of sommeliers would choose the easier route because it is quicker. No, R2M is different. They choose the fruit from the vineyard, make their own red, white and rosé wine at the Sorok Winery Wine School in Tal Shazar. They then age it, blend it and the wine experts at each particular outlet will sit together and democratically select the final restaurant wine.

It is typical of R2M to take the longest, most painstaking route to produce the entry-level wine. Talking about caring about ingredients and success through people – it is because of this approach and the investment cellar that the group caught my eye from a wine point of view.

So what is the secret? Shoham is not a shrinking violet and has bundles of self-confidence. He is knowledgeable yet curious and dynamic, and most significantly he has the absolute backing of the R2M management. A recipe for success. Visiting any of the group's outlets is a delight for the wine lover and connoisseur. Bravo! ■

*The writer has been advancing Israeli wines for more than 30 years. He is known as "the ambassador of Israeli wine" and "the English voice of Israeli wine."*