

Changing Your Club's Culinary Culture:

Does the Price of Fine Wine Leave a Bad Taste in Your Mouth?

Or How to Make the wine experience more palatable...

By

Gregg Patterson

General Manager, The Beach Club

Focus on The Grape---We've Got an Opportunity Here:

Here at The Beach Club, members drink a lot of wine, say good things about our wine program, contribute lots of dollars to our bottom line and razz members at other clubs about the shortcomings in their own wine programs. I love wine.

An argument can be made that wine is at the very core of the club experience. Wine builds relationships, relationships are the building blocks of community

and community is at the core of the club experience. Your wine philosophy tells others who you are as a club.

Wine is one of life's great delights and should be a special part of every social and dining experience. It makes friends when you share a bottle, it heightens the taste of food and it gives you a "buzz" that warms your innards and mellows your view of the cosmos.

That said, how could fine wine leave a bad taste in your mouth? We've all heard the lament---*Too expensive. Too snooty. Too remote. Too strange. Too much show and not enough go.*

You can wash away the sour taste of fine wine, makes lots of friends, build community and contribute to your bottom line. Let me show you the way.

Focus on The Grape---Tweaking Your Club's Wine Culture:

Clubs are in the "rift repair business," that is, they find cracks and fissures in the larger society and they create a private world that corrects those deficiencies. Wine is one of those "rifts"---too expensive, too intimidating, too confusing. Clubs should see wine as an opportunity to make friends, weld the community together and create a "buzz" within their culinary program. Consider the following.

Start with First Principles: Your club needs a wine philosophy. Clear. Concise. It should be published. It should be written on the wine list. Something like this might work.

Clubs are about community.

Relationships underpin community.

Relationships grow when people drink wine.

Wine should be drunk with every meal.

Wine should be priced to sell.

Experimentation should be fostered through pricing.

You Need A Catalyst---The Cost Conscious “Function over Form” Club Friendly Wine Committee: To make this wine direction work you need the right wine committee. You need a group of members and staff committed to building a broad based wine consuming community rather than an elitist little “wine club” within the club. .” Find people who speak of wine with a smile on their face and with joy in their heart. Avoid professor types who dry out the room when they talk. No place on the committee for the “Constipated Over-Inflated Self Important Wine Personality” who loves to denigrate and dismiss “no name wines” and the people who drink them. Find some “reverse snobs”--- those who take enormous pride and considerable joy in finding great wines at great prices. Search for people who drink wine regularly, get “the buzz” and are joyful as they talk about the bottles they’ve opened and the friends they’ve made through the grape.

Make Wine Affordable: Members can buy “club wines” at their local wine retailer. They know the prices. When clubs bruise and injure them with “wine multiples,” they know it and seethe. A club’s wine philosophy should make wine an affordable part of every meal and make the testing of true “upper end” wines as reasonable as possible. Pricing should be aggressive. Consider this---if the bottle costs less than ten dollars, the price should be doubled to arrive at the selling price. *If the bottle costs more than ten dollars, add a straight ten dollars to the cost of the bottle regardless of cost.* Members know how restaurants “rape and pillage” customers with double and triple pricing and a member friendly pricing strategy like this will win your club raging fans, convert culinary contrarians and create “the buzz” within and outside your club. Focus on the grape.

Create a New Set of Metrics: Forget the “cost of sales” paradigm. Think of total dollars contributed by the wine program. Pass around the love. Get lots of members to drink with ever greater frequency. Make up for smaller margins with higher dollar volume and bigger smiles. Judge success differently. Think “bottles drunk,” percentage of tables ordering wine and variety of wines served. Focus on the grape.

Save Money on the Peripherals: Wine and wine “peripherals” cost money. Those costs need to be built into the price of a bottle of wine. Lose the calf skin wine menus. Eliminate the wine steward. Use the wine display for linen storage. Find busboy proof wine glasses that look good and can survive “culinary combat.” Tighten down, focus on “the grape” and pass on the savings.

Make Your Corkage Fee a Selling Point Not a Deterrent: Some members enjoy bringing wine to the club from their cellars. They have a special bottle found in a special location having a special memory and they want to share the grape with friends and family. Corkage fees are levied on each bottle served for reasons having to do with pride and profit. Pride---clubs are proud of their wine lists, their list is priced in an “aggressively pro member” way and the list and its pricing invite experimentation. Profit---clubs are, in the final analysis, a business needing cash flow to survive. Wine aficionados (who, I assume, are the types bringing in fine wines) acknowledge those facts but don’t want to be bruised for being an aficionado of the grape. Charge them your standard \$10.00 per bottle profit margin, give them a little extra attention from the manager and your on staff “wine stud” and use your best stemware for effect. They’ll love you for endorsing their wine enthusiasm and the club will make the same amount it would selling any of its high end premium wines. Corkage can be a “win-win” for all involved.

Great Wine Prices Makes Food Prices Seem More Reasonable: Selling wine at rock bottom prices creates a “value glow” that carries over to the food. Members know the price of wine at the retailer, they know what restaurants charge per bottle, they see the club’s member friendly wine pricing strategy and they naturally believe that the food---which is something they can’t buy off the shelf at the local supermarket---is value priced as well. Leverage this “value glow” in your menu pricing.

Focus on the Grape---Pursue the Wine Adventure:

Wine is good. Priced right, wine will sell aggressively, improve your club’s bottom line and boost member morale. If your members drink wine with every meal they’ll be happier members. If the wine they drink is selected right, priced right, served right and promoted right, the food will taste better, conversations will flow more freely and good thoughts will spill forth toward the board, the management, the members and the club.

Focus on the grape and give yourself and the members “the buzz, the love and the glow.”