



JUST HOW HARD IS IT TO BE

A SOMMELIER?

Open a few bottles, flirt with female diners – it sounded like a breeze to writer-turned-sommelier **PANOS KAKAVIATOS**. Or so he thought...

We wine writers are opinionated types. Know-it-alls, some would say. We have to be. I write news, features and reviews about every wine region in the world. So how hard can it be to learn a wine list and open a few bottles?

Putting away my laptop and putting on a sommelier's apron, I was only too happy to take up the challenge of serving wine at a high-end French restaurant on the island of Nantucket, Massachusetts. It was summer on what was once a world



whaling capital – the setting for Moby Dick – but is today a magnet for well-heeled tourists seeking New England landscapes, rose-covered cottages, lighthouses, beaches and fine dining. As summer jobs go, I've had worse.

From 4 July to the end of September, I worked as wine steward for French restaurant The Chanticleer. Six evening shifts per week, 5–11pm, tasting food with three chefs, explaining wine to 15 waiters, and going from table to table to talk wine and food with an international set of successful business types. Technically I

‘How difficult can it be
to learn a wine list and
open a few bottles?’



Could wine writer Panos Kakaviatos
(below left) earn his grapes (above)?

instead of blisters from metal strings came thumb cuts from bottle capsules and hand muscle sores from inefficient openers that forced awkward cork pulls. Distributors visited the restaurant once a week so I could try new wines, but instead I begged for different bottle-openers. The corkscrew that worked best: an efficient hinged double lever system for better pulling, with a soft-touch handle that proved easier on the hand. Plus a sharp knife for more efficient capsule cutting.

Putting wine passion and knowledge to test in a restaurant also means knowing how the restaurant business works: understanding how to work with individual waiters and chefs and appreciating their eccentricities. Our full-on head waiter, for example, also moonlights as a ‘fetish arts’ photographer, attending ‘fetish conventions’, taking photos of scantily clad men and women pierced in the oddest locations. Our three seasoned chefs worked hard to create some of the most delicious food I have ever tasted. They sometimes drank hard too, feeding a competition as to who could create the best special. You could hear them in the kitchen, barking commands while handling knives, pots and bottles. Our head chef and his assistant once engaged in a ‘friendly fight’ to see who was tougher. But the patrons only saw warm professional service from everyone – including a group of hearty Bulgarian immigrants who brought food to and cleaned up after the tables. With ➤

couldn’t call myself a sommelier – lacking the necessary accreditation – but most restaurant wine stewards in the United States use the term liberally.

Its three cellars of French wine, ultra-formal dining atmosphere and superior cuisine have made the Chanticleer an island legend since the 1970s. When it was sold two years ago to a group of investors, the new team created a more casual though still elegant ambience, and worked from a smaller though broad wine list.

I began shifts re-stocking the cellar for some 6,000 monthly patrons, although I also spent mornings on the phone with distributors to re-order wines and check prices on possible new orders. Predictably, though, the job proved most intense at 7–10 pm, when 200 guests filled four dining areas. No surprise that one of the first lessons learned was not to wear fancy shoes. My feet ached.

I was reminded also of what chef sommelier David Ridgeway of La Tour

d’Argent in Paris once told me about clients who order delicious mature Bordeaux, only to be disappointed because they are not accustomed to drinking older wine. One table enthusiastically ordered Gewurztraminer. Having lived 10 years in Alsace, I, equally enthusiastically, brought over a Zind-Humbrecht Heimbouurg 1998. But smiles turned to frowns on tasting. The group had expected a dry white, rather than the spicy, somewhat thickly textured Alsatian with residual sugar. Another lesson learned. Know what clients really want.

No pain, no gain

After re-stocking the cellar, my next duty was to bring the mid-price wines and house pours from the cellar to two chilled containers in the kitchen nearest the dining areas. After the footwear lesson, another practical pointer: opening 20–30 bottles per evening at first felt like learning to play electric guitar all over again –

some 200 clients per evening, pent-up stress could not sufficiently be released through the after-service ‘staff drink’ – a single glass of wine or beer – authorised by management. Indeed, ‘staff drink’ often turned into ‘staff drinks’, including Champagne for kitchen hands and myself.

One night, after a successful evening, the head chef told me to break out some wines for ourselves in a private party: Méo-Camuzet Les Echézeaux 1999 and La Mission Haut-Brion 1996. He then cooked organically grown beef and scallops at 3am to create a legendary evening for a select group of staff.

Translation problems

As much as I enjoyed talking to people about wine and trying to find the best wine-food matches, being a wine steward is a performance – it takes a lot of energy, mental as well as physical, especially given an all-French wine list.

Most on-island restaurants propose wines from all over the world. The Chanticleer’s all-French list proved a healthy challenge, such as satisfying clients who were used to Californian Chardonnay. Fuller-bodied Meursault worked, but only after explaining less evident oak flavours.

One client had trouble with French reds ‘because of their earthy tannin,’ she told me. After two misfires, I hit the jackpot with Domaine de Trevallon 2001: a great vintage from the southern Rhône with a full-bodied mix of ripe Cabernet and Syrah. That wine also impressed another customer. He told me his budget was in the \$90 range, but the Trevallon cost \$72. He came back. I earned less from the initial sale, but wound up ordering a full case just for him and his friends. Another lesson: Win a customer’s trust with value before trying to climb the quality (and price) mountain.

Payment comprised a daily fixed salary of \$85, plus 5% of total bottle sales. But I also learned about ‘handshakes’ – usually containing \$20 – from customers satisfied with the service for helping them discover a new wine. One client slipped me a \$100 bill, after I picked two moderately priced

wines for his dinner party. ‘Don’t forget the handshakes,’ manager Susan Handy told me. I once snarled at a waiter for interrupting me while between two tables. Thankfully, he did not pocket the money himself, and handed me a \$50 bill from a client for whom I had double decanted two bottles of Château Margaux 1989 earlier that evening.

High rollers were common. I sold our entire stock of Lynch Bages 1989 to a group of California-based dot.com millionaires celebrating a friend’s birthday. They spent \$3,000 on wine alone – including the

A decent – and comfortable – corkscrew was Kakaviatos’ most important ally

aforementioned Gewurztraminer, this time thoroughly enjoyed – before downing Black Russian shots until 1am.

But there were also trials and tribulations. The most difficult customers, luckily only a few, insisted on tasting almost every house pour – at least eight wines – before deciding. I admit to cringing at certain requests. After explaining Château Carbonnieux 2004 as a fine Sauvignon Blanc, everyone seemed happy, except one woman who asked for ice in her glass. Conversely, I was cheered each time a client refused proffered ice buckets for their bottles of white, knowing that quality whites are best served at temperatures which do not mute aromas and flavours. Client complaints about bottle prices – thankfully also rare – brought out the reply that we could not propose wines beneath the high quality of the food.

Though very good at taking food



NANTUCKET: WHALING CAPITAL TO WINE CAPITAL

Rose-covered cottages, gentle landscapes and endless beaches make Nantucket Island the quintessential New England summer getaway, attracting an international clientele. Known for its local arts and crafts, Nantucket has also become a wine destination: a week-long wine festival held every May features

winemakers from all over the world with special tastings organised in some of the island’s most impressive seaside mansions. With a brisk yet warm summer climate, no surprise that the most popular wines include Burgundies and Loire Valley whites. The island was twinned with Burgundy’s Beaune in 2006.

AND WHAT IT'S REALLY LIKE: A SOMMELIER SPEAKS



Xavier Rousset is head sommelier and co-founder of Texture, and was previously head sommelier at two-Michelin-starred Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons

A typical day in the life of a sommelier begins with *mise en place*: the key to excellent service, which includes ensuring the fridges are full and the glasses are clean. It's also essential to check whether there is an event taking place, as the wines must be tasted before being served; there's nothing worse than having to change the wine

and the glasses halfway through service.

So, service: the first customers walk in, their food order is taken by the head waiter and I follow to take the drinks order. This could include drinks other than wines, such as water, cocktails or soft drinks: the product knowledge needed is a lot wider than people think. I am always careful when recommending wines to offer the customer a variety of choices and price brackets – it's crucial to cater to everyone's palettes... and wallets. Sommeliers have the reputation of trying to up-sell – we need to change that.

Once service is over, my legs start to ache. However, the day is still not over as I need to refill all the fridges with the wines sold during that evening.

I then hurry back to the office – the

work done there is key to a smooth running. Checking stock levels, invoices and preparing potential orders.

The road to becoming a great sommelier is not always a smooth one. When I was at Hotel du Vin a few years ago, a bottle of 1982 Sassicaia slipped through my hands and smashed all over the floor. The glass shattered everywhere and the wine, which would have been sold for about £400, was lost to the floor.

Being responsible for the training and performance of two other young sommeliers at Texture can also be incredibly demanding and I have to ensure that I am there to pick up the pieces should anything go wrong; let's just hope it's not the pieces of a expensive bottle...

orders, none of our waiters was versed in French wine, so I needed to re-explain the difference between Pouilly Fuissé and Pouilly Fumé, that Bordeaux is a blend while most Burgundy consists of either Pinot Noir or Chardonnay, and that most French wines are named after places, not grapes. When clients asked for dry Pinot Grigio – which we did not serve – I did not recommend the fuller-bodied Alsatian Pinot Gris, but crisp Rieslings, to match expectations. This required further explaining, as people often associate Riesling with off-dry white.

Before each shift, we tasted open bottles for wines served by the glass for freshness, but could not prevent the occasional complaint about such wines 'not tasting right'. Fog accentuated the island's striking beauty, but also provoked late wine shipments. We were once tempted to substitute our house Cabernet-based Bordeaux – a 2004 Fiefs de Lagrange – with a Coppola Claret 2005, a 12-bottle case of which had been specially ordered the night before for a group who insisted on American wine for their dinner. I did not give in to the temptation.

A hiccough

Things had been rolling smoothly for about six weeks; I was gaining confidence, enjoying my work and talking about my

passion: wine. Then came the gaffe. I had exchanged emails with an important client for a post-wedding Sunday lunch, two weeks in advance, recommending our house Chablis and a Morgon Beaujolais: they did not want to spend too much. The days that followed proved particularly busy: a wedding rehearsal dinner for 70, a group of optometrists who took up an entire dining area. By the time the Sunday rolled around, I decided to spend the day at the beach – a perk of working for an island restaurant. Just as I got out of the car, our head waiter frantically called me: 'Panos, what *!#\$ wines did you set aside for the post-wedding party,

because I have no *!#\$? clue, and they tell me they pre-arranged that with you!' he explained with justified anger. I had forgotten to tell the staff about the wines for the lunch, but I could not arrive in swimming apparel to the restaurant with meek explanations, so stuck to my beach plans. It was no 'day at the beach'.

The best part of the job was bantering with wine-savvy clients. Misunderstandings and questions included a complaint of tartaric crystal deposits in a bottle. The table seemed unconvinced when I tried to explain, so I printed out a web-based clarification of the phenomenon for

them to read. One Barry M Cooper of Canada, 'Grand Pilier General' of the 'Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin' passionately discussed the virtues of Burgundy. The occasional celebrity spiced things up. Charles Banks, co-owner of the ultra expensive California cult wine Screaming Eagle, allowed me to try the 1999, which showed a hint of volatility. German television news anchor Ulrich Wickert loved the 2000 Château Terry Gros Cailloux, a fine cru bourgeois from St-Julien. Political commentator Christopher Hitchens enjoyed a 2001 Bastor Lamontagne Sauternes. After I asked him whether he still supported the Iraq war, he explained why it was a good idea, and that 'in reality, five wars exist in Iraq today'. I thought of enquiring if five wars were a good idea, but did not. Another lesson: don't rock the boat with politics or other sensitive subjects.

As I write this, on my way to St-Emilion to research a feature, I think back to the restaurant and how other staff members – from waiters to chefs – travel to other destinations such as Florida or California for winter work, only to come back to Nantucket in the summer. I want to return next year, but will try not to gain so much weight next time. Another lesson learned. **D**

Panos Kakaviatos is a freelance wine writer who has written for such publications as Wines & Vines and Agence France Presse

