



SEVEN SOMMELIER SECRETS

BY ANTHONY MANIFOLD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM RETTIG

Why is it when we're dining out and the wine waiter shows up, we look like a deer in the headlights? Why should the simple task of choosing a bottle of wine become such an ordeal?

And what if we discover during the tasting ritual that the wine smells more like a compost heap than the nectar of the gods we thought we'd ordered? Do we insist on another bottle? Or submit, meekly nodding approval to the hovering sommelier?

We talked to three Worcester-area wine professionals to find out how to get the wine steward on your side, make savvy choices and look like a wine whiz to your dining companions.

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James Nicas is wine cellar master at the Castle Restaurant in Leicester.

1. What is a sommelier, anyway?

The very name sounds intimidating. "I like to break the ice by explaining to people that the likely derivation of the title is *bête de somme*, or 'beast of burden,' which described the mule used to carry barrels up from the wine cellar by monks. The monk that led the mule was known as the sommelier," says Lorenzo Savona, partner and director of Tomasso Trattoria on Route 9 in Southboro. Today, the sommelier is more commonly known as the wine steward or wine director. "That's the person in the restaurant," Savona goes on, "who's there to help guests through the process of wine selection."

2. I know what I like, so why talk to the wine waiter?

"It's true," says Michael Covino, proprietor and general manager of Block Five, 139 Green St., Worcester, "some guests know exactly what they want and that's wonderful. But quite often there are choices on our wine list that guests rush by because they don't know what the wines are. When you consult with one of our wine specialists, he or she can help you in choosing the right bottle for the occasion. This means not only recommending the best wine to pair with your food and enhance your dining experience with us, but also the right price."

3. What if there is no wine specialist?

Cellar Master James Nicas at the Castle Restaurant, 1230 Main St., Leicester, thinks this is not a serious problem today because an increasing number of people know more about wine and enjoy drinking wine regularly. "However," he says, "if there is no sommelier, a well-trained waiter — one who has experienced the flavors of the wines — can lead the guest." Covino concurs. "We empower our servers to be knowledgeable about our wines so they can make suggestions to guests that fit their palates and their budgets."

4. How do I get the wine waiter to give me their best shot?

"The mantra I use in my wine tasting classes," says Savona, "is that the first responsibility of the diner is to be honest. Tell me exactly what you want. Do you prefer red, white, rosé or sparkling wine? Do you like merlot, don't like cabernet sauvignon, like Sangiovese, don't like chianti? If



Lorenzo Savona, partner and director of Tomasso Trattoria, decants wine while preparing for a wine dinner.

you're out with friends, it's fine to say we don't want to spend more than \$30." Nicas' advice is, "Give me some parameters to work with and I will take you on an adventure to somewhere you hadn't thought of going to."

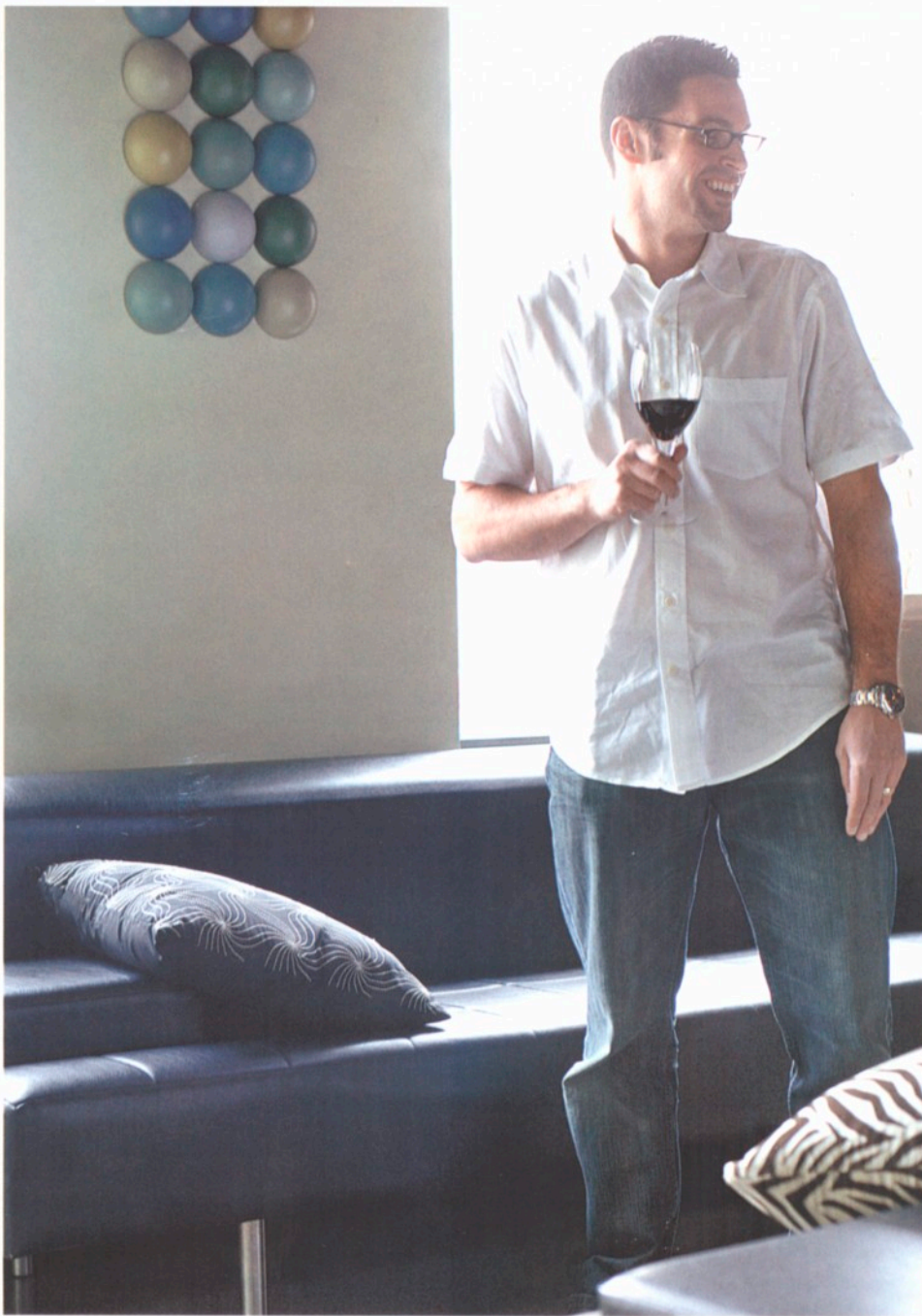
Covino stresses the importance of matching the wine with the guest's choice of food. "I ask, 'What are you thinking of having for dinner tonight?' I like to bring it back to wine and food pairing. But the first thing I want to know is what you normally like to drink. Then I can branch out from there and recommend something that is maybe different, but which you can relate

to and really appreciate."

5. What about tasting the wine I've selected?

Savona observes that diners often regard the presentation and tasting of the chosen wine as perfunctory.

"It's not," he says. "That's where the 'contract' begins. That's the wine you ordered. That's the wine you're going to drink and that's the wine you're going to pay for. So, first look at the label and make sure it's the wine and vintage you ordered. And don't be shy about asking to see the list again if you can't remember what you ordered."



Michael Covino is the proprietor and general manager of Block Five in Worcester.

"The wine should be at the right temperature when it's brought to the table," says Nicas. "You should have clean glasses and accessories like an ice bucket if needed. I'm a firm believer in leaving the cork at the table to indicate at least that it really is the wine you ordered."

Covino agrees but points out that guests should not accept or refuse a bottle of wine based on the appearance of the cork alone. "Let the wine get in your glass," he says. "Give it a swirl to get some air into it and release the flavors. Then smell and taste the wine. If it's good, just nod your head and away you go."

6. What if the wine doesn't taste right?

The most common problem is 'corked' wine. This means the cork has been tainted by a mold known as trichloroanisole. "It makes the wine smell like your Uncle Louie's musty old basement," says Savona.

Wines can also fail the smell and taste test if they are past their prime or have not been properly cellared. "If you think the wine is off," says Covino, "you should say to the server, 'I'm not sure about this wine. Is it perhaps off or is it just the style?' We'll be happy to pour you another taste and, if it's bad, offer you another bottle. If it's a

Sommelier suggestions

Lorenzo Savona suggests ...

- Massa Vecchia, IGT Toscana Bianca 2003, \$82
Made with traditional full skin contact usually reserved for red wine. Redolent of dried apricots, almonds, sage and orange zest.

- Badia a Coltibuono, Sangiovetto di Toscana 1999, \$87

Tannic wine with concentration of dried cherries, violets, black tea leaves and dusty earthiness reminiscent of the back roads of the Tuscan countryside.

James Nicas suggests ...

- Cour-Cheverny, Domaine des Huards 2004, \$38

Vinted in the Loire from the almost extinct Romorantin white grape. Rich, intense and vibrant with fruit and acidity.

- Teroldego Mezzacorona, Trentino 2003, \$42
Red wine exhibiting deep extraction and soft finish with good acidity to balance well with food.

Michael Covino suggests ...

- Marc Brédif, Vouvray 2005, \$15 (375ml)

Dry-style Chenin Blanc with hints of honeysuckle and apricot matched with vibrant acidity.

- Tikal Patriota Malbec/Bonarda 2005, \$38

Well-structured with full, ripe red fruit flavors and hint of chocolate reinforced with firm tannins. Pairs perfectly with filet steak.

question of style, usually the wine mellows when the air gets to it, so you may want to wait another few minutes to see if it has changed."

If there really is a problem, according to Nicas, any true wine professional will gladly replace the bottle for you.

7. How important is price?

"How do you compare Fred's Diner with the restaurant at the Ritz Carlton?" asks Savona. "They are each great in their own right. If you pay more do you get more? Absolutely. But at our restaurant we spend as much time searching for our house wine as we do for upper-end wines. It's more difficult to find very good less expensive wine than very good expensive wine."

Covino agrees. "It costs money to age good wines and they usually have a legacy behind them. Having said that, it's important for people here to know that there is a growing number of restaurants in Worcester committed to having a great selection of fine wines at affordable prices."

Their secrets are out, so who's still afraid of the big, bad sommelier? The enjoyment of fine wine enhanced by the expertise of your wine waiter is yours for the asking. **W**