

MATCH POINT

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Training the chef can be as important as training the staff.

Sommeliers take note: aside from a few specific restaurant settings, your knowledge alone is not enough to run a successful beverage program. Much more important than what you know is what your staff knows.

I think most of you understand how important training your service staff can be in terms of not only beverage sales, but customer satisfaction. But even in restaurants where every guest can speak with a sommelier to guarantee a perfect food-and-wine experience, rarely have all the necessary steps been taken. Remember, wine is only one part of the equation: $W + F = H$, where wine plus food equals happy.

We may be past the days when the beverage program was a stand-alone entity, managed by the wine director to satisfy whatever the customer (or sommelier) wanted. Now, we need to create programs that take into account everything from the style of the restaurant to what the bartender is mixing to—often the most important aspect—what the chef is cooking. Unfortunately, many sommeliers are still allowing chefs to maintain their “this-is-what-I-am-going-to-cook-find-something-to-go-with-it” attitude. We blush and make excuses in the dining room about the chef’s use of artichokes or spinach or chili (and we all have our secrets on how to create at least one passable pairing for the guest), while we blab on about food-and-wine harmony.

How can we better serve our guests by ensuring that the wines we recommend complement the dishes they order? And, when applicable, how can we ensure that the special bottle

a guest has ordered or brought in is enhanced by the food sent to the table? Train. Then communicate. Yes, there are chefs who believe they are the most important part of the equation, or who couldn’t care less if the garnish on their entrée makes the guests’ \$7,500 bottle of DRC taste metallic, but (we hope) they are a dying breed. Many of them just don’t know better.

We spend countless hours training and retraining the front of the house about wines and their interaction with food, but rarely are we training the back of the house. Chefs expect the service staff, including the sommelier, to know about cooking techniques and their impact on the dishes. Shouldn’t the sommelier expect the kitchen staff, including the chef, to understand the impact their decisions can have on a guest’s dining experience? We make their food taste better; isn’t it time to expect the same in return? Chefs spend years cooking, tasting the results, matching ingredients, tasting the results, matching textures, and tasting the results. Yet most of them have no idea how a bit of sugar or a dash of chili can affect the way the food reacts with the wine—they only know its impact on the dish. Which is only half of the equation for “happy.”

It’s time to close this gap. Train your kitchen staff to taste wine and to understand its importance in a dining experience. Show them the impacts of sweetness, saltiness, and bitterness on wines. Make them understand that the long hours they have put into preparing these dishes are relatively few compared to the hours that the vintner spent making the wines. That will build respect and help encourage wine-friendly food—but training only matters if it makes for better service.

Once the kitchen is on board and you’ve done the requisite training, communication is the make-or-break element of service. The chef makes sure you know what food is going to the table, but are you telling the kitchen what wine has been ordered? When a tasting menu is set up with a recommended wine pairing, the sommelier has the job of selecting wines to complement those dishes. But if Table 14 orders a bottle of 1945 Mouton and the roasted chicken, then it’s the chef’s turn to make sure the food is complementing the wine. Whether you route your point-of-sale system to print wine chits on the expo printer or you actually speak to the kitchen about each wine order, if you truly believe in creating a food-and-wine experience, you must ensure that the kitchen knows what the tables are drinking. And just as you saw the results in wine sales from your hours spent training servers, you will see the results in your guests’ satisfaction.

We all know how chefs *can* be. But even if your chef is not open to the idea, you can allow (and encourage) the rest of the kitchen staff to attend training sessions. At least you will be training the chefs of the future to be more wine-friendly.

Christopher Bates has been working in restaurants since he was 15, but started cooking much earlier. After studying hotel administration at Cornell University, he worked in wineries in Valpolicella, the Mosel, New York, Oregon, and Washington. He was general manager at The Inn at Dos Brisas in Brenham, Texas, for more than three and a half years, seeing the program through enfranchisement by Relais & Châteaux and Relais Gourmand and a Mobil Five Star award, and is now executive chef and general manager at the Hotel Fauchère in Milford, Pa. His major obsession is German wines.

