



May We Help You?

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



“May I help you?”

“I’d like to buy a bottle to go with dinner.”

“Red or White?”

“Well, I’m not sure. We’re having chicken?”

“Who’s cooking it?”

“My wife.”

“Fried, roasted, grilled . . . ?”

“I don’t know. Let me call her.” Then he opens his cell phone and calls home. “Hey sweetie, how are you cooking the chicken tonight? The Spec’s wine guy wants to know so he can recommend the right wine. What’s it called again? Coq au Vin? Oh, OK. He’s nodding. I think he knows . . .”

Pay attention to any Spec’s wine department on any weekday evening or any Saturday morning and you will hear this same basic scene played out again and again. A customer comes in and wants a wine to go with dinner and the Spec’s wine guy starts asking questions. Please don’t be put off by the questions. He (or she) wants to help you get the right wine and the more information they have, the more likely they will bull’s-eye what you want.

The Spec’s wine guy’s job is to ask . . .

“What are you eating?”

“How’s it prepared?”

“What sort of wines do you like?”

(And here’s the tough one . . .)

“How much do you want to spend?”

Your (the customer’s) job is to know the answers and be clear and honest in giving them. Tell us what you want.

If we (the Spec’s wine guys) know what you’re eating and how it’s being prepared, we can get on base. If we know what the side dishes are and what you are eating before and after, we can get to second. If we know the sort of wines you and the misses (or mister) like, we can round third. If we also know how much you want to spend, we can hit a home run. If we have less than complete or accurate information, we could get stranded on base or worse strike out all together. It all seems pretty straight forward, right? What could go wrong?

Come in and tell me that you are having grilled rib-eyes, that you like California Cabernet Sauvignon but you “don’t like too much chocolate in your wine” (you don’t like really over-ripe Cabernet), and you want to spend between \$30 and \$40, and we are in business. I’m likely to recommend the 2005 vintage of Alexander Valley Vineyards “Cyrus” that sells for \$37.99 cash (see box for my note). Another Spec’s wine guy might point you to a different wine but my bet is you’ll like either wine we recommend – as long as you gave us good information.

What could be different?

If the rib-eyes are pan seared (rather than grilled), finished in the oven, and served with a pan reduction sauce (butter and shallots with wine used to deglaze the pan), my recommendation might move from California Cabernet to a good red Bordeaux from Pauillac or St. Julien (either of which is still Cabernet Sauvignon dominant).

If the price range changes, you will get a different wine and it will be a little better or a little less good depending on the direction you want to go. If you tell me you want a “\$20-to-\$30 wine” my pick may go to Paradise Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon, Rockpile (Sonoma County), 2006 (\$28.46 cash). If you tell me you want a “\$40-to-\$50 wine” my pick may go to Neal Family Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, 2006 (\$47.49 cash).

How much difference is there between the Neal, the Cyrus, and the Paradise Ridge? While it is not easy to quantify it in a score comparison (they all are very nice wines), the difference in the mouth is there; the more expensive wine tastes more expensive – which is to say that it tastes better. Maybe it is richer or has more texture. Wines, like any other market driven product, have an intrinsic value. They may get introduced at a price that is too high (or too low) but over the years, that price will move up or down to reflect where consumers hold the wine to fit in the market. If wine is priced too high, it will not sell well enough for the next vintage to be released on schedule. If it is priced too low, it will sell out way before the next vintage is released. Either case will cause the winery to adjust pricing. Once the wine has been in the market for a few years, it will find its point of price equilibrium. Once they do, their price will accurately indicate their quality.

ALEXANDER VALLEY VINEYARDS Cyrus, Alexander Valley, 2005 12x750ml \$37.99 \$213.89

Tech: 14% Alcohol. 76% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Franc, 2% Malbec, and 2% Petite Verdot fermented using pump-overs and aged 24 months in all French oak barrels (30% new) Inky purple-red-black in color; stains the glass with its well-formed legs. Dry, full-bodied with balanced acidity and chewy phenolics. Rich, ripe, Cabernet (and at 76% Cabernet Sauvignon, it could legally be called Cabernet) offering black with a little red fruit, dusty cocoa powder, tobacco, black pepper, earth, and oak. Pencil shavings are immediately present on the mid palate and in the finish. As the wine opens, the pencil shaving notes move into the nose. Supple, rich, and utterly delicious but still has enough cut to satisfy an old school Cab-lover. Yum. Pushes all the right buttons. Outstanding. BS: 96.

Keep in mind that, as with any other consumer product, perceived quality accounts for more than just how good the product tastes. If it were purely on taste, Silver Oak – which is very good wine – would be priced a bit lower. It is a consistently reliable, very good wine that also has a special cache with a certain clientele (think male in high-end steakhouse) that keeps its price higher (but still in that same market equilibrium).

If you are looking for the \$40-\$50 wine experience and you don't tell the wine guy, he may recommend a lesser wine that he really likes at its price point. It will be good and it may be excellent but it won't give you the experience you are looking for. Tell us what you want. At the same time, if you want a good bottle priced under \$20, tell us that. We have great selections there too. Just remember that they offer a bit less in the areas of flavor, richness, and feel than the higher priced picks.

So to go back to that original example, once I know you are eating Coq au Vin (chicken braised in red wine), I know you need a red wine and I will ask you what sort of wine your wife is using to braise it. Once I know that (let's say she is using a \$10 bottle of Cotes du Rhone) and have your price range (let's say you specified \$20-\$30), I can recommend wine. In this case, I will go with St. Cosme Gigondas 2008 (\$28.49 cash) which will match up brilliantly with the dish.

Chateau St. COSME, Gigondas, 2008

12x750ml \$28.49 \$320.91

An estate grown blend of 65% Grenache, 15% Syrah, 15% Mourvedre, and 5% Cinsault fermented in concrete tanks and aged for 12 months (70% in 1-to-4-year-old barrels, 15% in wooden vats, and 15% in concrete vats) before blending and bottling. (The property lost 50% of the crop to hail). Deep red-purple in color and with very well formed legs; dry, medium full-bodied with freshly balanced acidity; moderately chewy phenolics. Supple and juicy with lots of sweet mostly dark red Grenache-dominated fruit accented with lots of black pepper and an elegant mineral earthiness. There is a touch of garrigue but the style here is more elegant than earthy. Chewy but still fresh. Very long finish. Delicious and getting better in the bottle. Excellent. BS: 91+.

The more we know about what you want, the better we can choose from among the thousands of wines we offer to get the one perfect for you. That's our job and we really enjoy getting it right. May we help you? ✨

ABOUT THOSE STEAKS ...

If that pan-seared Rib-Eye sounds good to you, here's the deal.

1. Buy some nice (at least Choice, Certified Angus may be better, Prime is best) rib-eyes (or New York Strips) cut an inch and a half thick.
2. Set them out on a cutting board and salt them on both sides and let them come up to room temperature (very important).
3. Put a thick-bottomed, oven-safe, lightly-oiled pan (I use a cast iron skillet) on a burner over high heat and let it get hot to the point where it is just beginning to smoke.
4. Put in a pat of butter for each steak and set the steaks right on top of the butter. There will be some smoke and a lot of sizzle.
5. Cook for 2 minutes and then turn the steaks, each onto a fresh pat of butter. Once the steaks are turned, reduce heat to medium and cook two more minutes.
6. Remove pan from heat and put in 300° oven for another 2 minutes for medium-rare.
7. Remove pan from oven and return it to the burner. Remove steaks from pan to a cutting board to rest. Tent them with aluminum foil.
8. Turn burner back on to medium heat. Add two ounces of butter and a quarter cup of finely diced shallots. Cook until the shallots are well softened, about two minutes.
9. Turn heat up to high and deglaze the pan with 4-6 ounces of red wine (I use Gallo Hearty Burgundy). Reduce to half. Remove from heat and serve the sauce over the steaks (which have now rested long enough to safely cut into).
10. Enjoy

Notes:

If the steaks are a bit thinner, reduce the sear time to 90 seconds per side. If they are a bit thicker or you want them more done, allow a little more time in the oven. If you want, you can do the whole thing outdoors – thereby avoiding smoking up the house.

