



QUESTIONS

by Charles M. Bear Dalton

Sometimes my wife Carol and I fall into what I think of as “the vulture scene” at the end of the animated Disney Jungle Book movie.

“What do you wanna do?”

“I dunno. What do you wanna do?”

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“I dunno. What do you wanna do ...”

We are indecisive.

Spec’s can be a great place to be indecisive. I know some couples who begin their browsing just after we open on Saturday and are still picking and choosing three hours later. With over 11,000 different wines to choose from, Spec’s caters to the indecisive. With a huge food section and more of everything beer-wine-and-spirits than anyone else in the US, we are all about the indecisive.

Nevertheless, sometimes you want some help picking something out. You don’t quite know what you want but you have some parameters. You need a wine to serve with dinner. Or you need a wine to serve at your daughter’s wedding. Or you need a special bottle to give as a gift. You’d like one of our wine staff to help you make a selection. Here’s how you can help us help you.

The most important thing we need to know is ... How much do you want to spend? If you answer “medium-priced” or “not too much” or “I want something really nice” you’re not really telling us much. When we ask “How much do you want to spend?” we’re looking for a number which you might express as “under \$10 per bottle” or “\$15 to \$20 per bottle” or “around \$60 per bottle”.

Why do we want to know? Your answer gives us a good place to start. Our staff knows that as with most commodities (and wine is a commodity), with wine, you get what you pay for. They know you are not going to get a \$50 experience from a \$20 bottle and they know you are not going to get a \$20 experience from an \$8 bottle. They also know that sometimes the budget, the time, and the place call for an \$8 bottle and there is little or no upward wiggle room on the price. If you are up front about your price range, we will be better at helping you find the right wine. If what you want doesn’t exist (“I’d like something that tastes like this Caymus Napa Valley Cabernet but I want to pay \$18 per bottle.”), we’ll tell you – and then find you the best \$18 bottle of Cabernet we have.

Our next question depends on why you are buying the wine ... so tell us. Why are you buying the wine? Is it for dinner? Is dinner at home, at a friend’s house, or at a BYOB restaurant? Do you know what food is being served?

Is the wine for an event? What sort of event? What foods are being served? Will it be indoors or outdoors? How fancy is it? What’s the age range of those attending? Are most of those attending regular wine drinkers or more special occasion wine drinkers?

Is the wine intended as a gift? If so, for what occasion? Is it a hostess gift or a birthday present? Is it intended as a thank you? What are the tastes of the intended recipient? What do they normally drink? Is the person a casual wine drinker or are they into wine? Roughly how old are they?

The answers to all these questions will help us help you.

Our staff members taste and drink a lot of wine. Most have wine experience that far exceeds their ages and their income levels. That makes sense since they are professionals who get to try a lot of wines in the course of their work and get invited to a lot of tastings. Many of them are also “wine geeks” whose primary hobby is learning more about wine. Many of them have been exposed to significant wine industry travel. In addition to the more readily available stuff, they have tasted first growth Bordeaux and Grand Cru Burgundy. They are trained in wine by Spec’s but they also have a passion for it. In short, they are qualified to help you.

When we train our Spec’s wine department employees to help customers select wine to go with dinner, we tell them to ask two questions: “What are you serving it with?” and “How much do you want to spend?” If I could “train” all Spec’s wine customers to do just one thing, it would be to answer the second of those two questions with a figure. If you tell me under \$15 and grilled steak, I know what to show you. On the other hand, if you tell me you want to “keep it under \$50” and are having prime tenderloin, I’d be doing you a disservice to recommend a \$15 bottle. You’ve just told me you want the \$45 - \$50 experience and the \$15 bottle, as good as it is, doesn’t - won’t - can’t deliver that experience. So I will recommend a higher priced wine to go with your special dinner ... and then, if you have time, I will do you the additional service of telling you about a value-priced alternative for everyday drinking. If you’re as smart as I think you are, you’ll buy both because you want the special occasion wine for your dinner but you also are always on the lookout for a good everyday drinker.

As to the event where you need several lower priced cases or the gift for your hostess - friend - client - boss, the same rules apply. Tell us how much and as much as you can about the occasion or person. The more we know, the better able we are to help you. For an event, tell us the venue and the menu as well as the sort of event and who will be there. For a gift, tell us the name of the person. If they are really into wine, we may know them.

I’ll let you in on a little secret. At least once a month and sometimes a lot more often, I find myself talking with one of our staff in the same situation you are in. Yes, I am Spec’s fine wine buyer and yes, I taste well over 9,000 wines a year. Nevertheless, I sometimes ask Zach (our German category manager) for help with a not-too-dry German Riesling for under \$25 to go with an Asian dinner or Kia (our Champagne diva) for a good pick on a grower Champagne. Ralph (our Burgundy specialist) offers me good advice on finding the right bottle to go with slow roasted beef loin. Joe Kemble (our Italian Buyer), Ross (our Argentine specialist), and Collin Williams (our Spanish wine buyer) also are resources I use. John Rydman (Spec’s president and a teacher from whom I have learned much over the years), occasionally buzzes me or one of those I’ve just mentioned and asks the same sorts of questions. I know all this stuff (after all, I’m a professional) but sometimes even I need to be reminded or perhaps prodded.

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