

Sommeliers' Role and Influence as a Wine Marketer in the United States

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This paper discusses the role of the sommelier as a marketer of wine to influence wine sales in restaurants in the United States. On average, customers ask a sommelier to provide wine recommendations 38% of the time and Sommeliers volunteer wine recommendations 42% of the time. While wine is becoming increasingly popular and consumers are more knowledgeable, sommeliers continue to play an important role in identifying best products available to meet customer's expectations. Sommeliers focus on value for the money, winery reputation, type of variety and tracking customer preference when selecting and recommending wines to customers. In order to have influence with the customer, the title Sommelier or Wine Steward rather than Beverage Director appears to be important to the customer. Most sommeliers rely on Wine Spectator, word of mouth, and their customers' experiences and preferences to stay current on wines.

Introduction

The greatest shift in consumer purchase behavior over the past generation has been from table wines to quality wines, particularly in traditional wine drinking countries. Relatively few people consume wine. In the United States 40 to 45 percent of the adult population does not drink any alcoholic beverages. Of the remainder, less than 20 percent are “regular” wine drinkers, and they account for most of the wine consumption. The occasional wine drinker, an additional 40 percent of the remainder, tends to like wine and might buy more of it if persuaded to do so (Moulton & Lapsley, 2001). This paper discusses the marketing of wine and the role of the sommelier as a marketer of wine to influence wine sales in restaurants.

Marketing of Wine

The overriding conclusion of the Merrill Research & Associates (2006) tracking study is that the U.S. wine industry now stands at a crossroads. In the last five years, 2000-2005 there has been a 29 percent increase in the number of core wine drinkers. For the first time in thirty years, a new generation of young adults gives evidence of a strong preference for wine as part of their lifestyles. With their significant age-group numbers and their adoption of wine in their mid-twenties, they are a leading indicator of great potential as their cohorts likewise reach adulthood. With adult per capita consumption of table wine now at 2.77 gallons per capita, a twenty-year high, the prospect for continued and rapid growth of demand for wine in the coming decade is significant. At the same time, there has been a 21 percent increase in the number of marginal wine drinkers from 2000-2005.

Consumers purchase wine for various occasions at a variety of hospitality outlets including restaurants, bars nightclubs and catered events. One of the key factors in the successful marketing of wine is the identification of what is important to the consumer (target market).

Sommeliers and Training

There are many definitions for a sommelier or wine steward. MacNeil (2001) explains that a modern sommelier or wine steward chooses wine, maintains the inventory, trains service staff on how to sell wine and works the dining room to recommend wines. Koplán et al. (1996) describe the wine steward as the person solely responsible for assisting the customers with their wine selections and for the service of that wine at the table. Aspler (1991) includes creating the wine list, purchasing of wine, inventory management, staying current on consumer trends, participating in proper rotation of inventory and promoting wines, and helping with food and wine pairing at the table.

For many years wine education focused on product knowledge than on staff training, selling techniques or wine service. In the 1970s, the Court of Master Sommeliers was established to improve beverage knowledge and service in hotels and restaurants. In the late 1980s, the Academy of Wine Service was founded to improve the standard of wine education and service skills in the United Kingdom's hotel, restaurant, and catering industry (Bennett, 1993). Today, several organizations are dedicated to improving the education of beverage knowledge and service. However, the American hotel and restaurant industry does not require a particular certificate or diploma to hold the position of sommelier or wine steward in a restaurant or hotel.

Hochstein (1994) suggests that using a sommelier or wine steward can lead to increased beverage sales. Manske and Cordua (2005) support this idea by suggesting the sommelier or wine steward influences the sale of wine by establishing credibility and use a sales technique to close a wine sale. In a comparison of ten months worth of 2004 wine sales information from the Texas Alcohol and Beverage Commission (TABC), Manske and Cordua analyzed 14 restaurants that were comparable in average check and wine list size. The results showed that the average sales per square foot for restaurants with wine stewards was \$142.00 per square foot compared to \$84.00 per square foot for restaurants without wine stewards. They then reviewed how staff training, the wine steward's credibility, and the use of adaptive or persuasive selling might affect wine sales. They concluded that knowledge of wine is important but that skill in selling is also critical to increase wine sales.

Wine Knowledge

Market research suggests that product knowledge plays an important role in the purchasing of wine and that knowledgeable service staff's wine suggestions are how many wine consumers first experience wine (Granucci et al., 1994). For this reason, service staff plays an important role in the potential of increased revenues from wine in restaurants. In this evaluation, an increase in wine knowledge was attributed to an increase in wine knowledge through organized training. However, an increase in wine

sales was not conclusive at a statistically significant level through organized wine training (Granucci et al., 1994).

Wine training has been shown to increase wine sales in fine dining restaurants like the Disneyland Resort’s Napa Rose. Michael Jordan, who has led the operations at Napa Rose, has undertaken an ambitious wine training program for his staff. Currently, 34 of the restaurant’s 75 staff members – including executive chef Andrew Sutton, his sous-chefs and bussers and hosts – are certified as sommeliers (Spector, 2004). Jordan believes that this training translates in increased wine sales and a growing local-customer base. Because of this personal wine training their staff turnover is virtually non-existent.

Contradicting conclusions between whether wine education or a sommelier can increase wine sales intrigued the authors to look for more answers about how sommeliers select and recommend wine, how often customers request recommendations for wine, as well as, the most successful venue for a sommelier. Are sommelier practices in line with the wine consumer’s expectations and in how they choose wine?

Wine Lists

In restaurants that offer high-quality wine, customers are provided with a wine list from which to consider their selection. A common practice is to sort the wines into white, red, and sparkling wines, and then group by varietal and/or origin within each subset. In many instances, restaurants supply a description of the sensory qualities of the wine along with the brand, vintage, origin, and price.

A pervasive theme in the literature is that user-friendly wine lists are recommended; most guests do not want to spend significant time going through a massive wine menu. A list of as few as 50 extremely well chosen wines is considered more than enough to cover all the bases, even for fine dining restaurants. Progressive wine lists, where wine is ranked from lightest to heaviest and then by descriptors are popular. These lists assist the guest in understanding what to expect in the bottle. Master Sommelier, Andrea Immer, focused her wine training for Starwood Corporation on the “Big Six” grapes and body styles to avoid descriptors that could be viewed as too personal (Salopek, 2000). Current sales trends show that while wine consumption is increasing, many customers are trading down a notch. This means that they are looking for value and are less willing to make selections at super-premium price points or suffer onerous mark-ups. The success of wine-by-the-glass sales has spurred restaurateurs to offer quartinos, carafes, and half-bottles. Customers are willing to pay more for wine when they do not have to commit to a full bottle (Wines & Spirits, April 2006).

Restaurant wine stewards or sommeliers generally provide sensory descriptions based on personal tasting, though accuracy may be questionable in restaurants which lack sufficiently trained or experienced employees. Some winemakers include descriptions with their wine shipments (Hochstein, 1994). While research into the impact of sensory descriptions on choice is limited, their broad use and inclusion in critical wine evaluations from *The Wine Spectator* and *The Wine Advocate* suggest a perceived importance. Charters, Lockshin, and Unwin (1999) found that 57 percent of a sample of

56 Australian wine consumers claimed to read the back label of wine bottles, and these consumers reported the most useful information was the “simple descriptions of the tastes or smells.”

Review of Sommelier Viewpoint

The data reviewed for this paper is from a report conducted by Yankelovich Partners from October 24 to November 28, 2000. This report was prepared for Ste. Michelle Wine Estates. They conducted 250 telephone interviews among people at fine restaurants who were in charge of the selection and recommendation of wines for customers. Acceptable titles included: Sommeliers, Wine Stewards, Beverage Directors/Managers (only if the restaurant did not have a Sommelier or Wine Steward) Owners (only if the restaurant did not have a Sommelier or Wine Steward). Unless otherwise noted, these personnel as a group are referred to as sommeliers. All respondents either recommended or served wine to customers.

Fine restaurants were selected from Wine Spectator’s “Gold Medal Winners” list and supplemented by Zagat’s Top 2000 Restaurants. The interviews averaged 29 minutes in length. Tests of statistically significant differences between subgroups were conducted at the 95% confidence level.

Sommelier Demographics

On average, the sommeliers interviewed have been serving, selecting, and/or recommending wines for 15 years. They have been in their current positions for 8 years.

Nearly everyone participates in the selection of wines for their restaurant’s wine list. About three quarters of the sommeliers have sole responsibility for deciding which wines appear on the wine list (72%) and determining the price points for the wines (77%).

Many sommeliers (60%) receive on-the-job training from more experienced sommeliers.

On average, sommeliers spend 5 hours per week on the Internet for work purposes. About one in five (21%) do not spend any time on the Internet.

The average age of the sommeliers is 41 years, and most (83%) are male.

Wine Recommendation Factors

Sommeliers consider the value, variety, and taste of the wine, and the reputation of the winery to be important when recommending wines to customers. “Value for the money”, “reputation of the winery” and “food ordered by the customer” was rated as “somewhat important” to “very important” by over 93 percent of survey respondents. Interestingly 86 percent of sommeliers surveyed rated type of variety as important when recommending a wine. Additionally, their personal preference for the wine was important 85 percent of the time.

The factors rated important by most sommeliers when recommending wines to their customers are noted in Table 1.

Factors Considered When Recommending Wines to Customers	<i>Percent Responding Very and Somewhat Important</i>
1. Value for the money	94
2. The reputation of the winery	93
3. Entrée ordered by customer	93
4. Type of varietal	86
5. Your personal preference for the wine	85
6. Brand name recognition of the winery	79
7. Profitability of the wine to the restaurant	76
8. Type of consumer the customer appears to be	74
9. Information provided by the winery	74
10. Relationship with the winery directly	74

Table 1. Factors Considered When Recommending Wines to Customers (n=250)

Selecting Wines for the Wine List

Nearly all the sommeliers are involved in the selection of wines for their restaurant’s wine list. Wine lists are updated monthly or more frequently in about two thirds of the restaurants.

The factors considered “very important” or “somewhat important” when selecting wines for their restaurant’s wine list by over 95 percent of sommeliers include that the “wine can be priced fairly,” “customer requests”, “restaurant cuisine” and “the reputation of the winery.” “Value for the money” and “vintage” were also considered “very important” or “somewhat important by over 91 percent of respondents. Finally, purchasing trends of your restaurant’s customers”, “profitability of the wine to the restaurant”, “personal preference for the wine”, and type of variety” were each rated as “very important” to somewhat important” by over 88 percent of sommeliers.

The factors most sommeliers consider to be very or somewhat important when selecting wines for their restaurant’s wine list are illustrated in Table 2.

Factors Considered When Selecting Wines for Wine List	<i>Percent Responding Very and Somewhat Important</i>
1. Can be priced fairly	96
2. Customer requests	96
3. Restaurant’s cuisine	96
4. The reputation of the winery	95
5. Value for the money	94
6. Vintage	91
7. Purchasing trends of your restaurant’s customers	89
8. Profitability of the wine to the restaurant	88
9. Personal preference for the wine	88
10. Type of varietal	88

Table 2. Factors Considered When Selecting Wines for Wine List (n=250)

Request for Recommendation by Sommelier

On average, customers ask a sommelier to provide wine recommendations 38 percent of the time. Sommeliers volunteer wine recommendations 42 percent of the time. Those in smaller restaurants (seats less than 130 people) report a higher average percentage of customers requesting wine recommendations than those in larger restaurants. They are also more likely to provide a specific wine recommendation more frequently. Official Sommeliers and Wine Stewards more frequently receive requests for and volunteer wine recommendations than those who have similar functions but different titles (such as Beverage Director).

When there is an Official Sommelier or Wine Steward in a restaurant, a higher percentage of parties order wine. More wine is also ordered in smaller restaurants than in larger restaurants. Additionally, customers spend a larger percentage of their bill on wine in smaller restaurants or in Coat & Tie restaurants than in Fine or Casual Dining restaurants.

How Do Sommeliers Stay Current?

Most sommeliers rely on the Wine Spectator, word of mouth, and their customers' experiences and preferences to stay current on wines. Official Sommeliers and Wine Stewards are more likely to cite Robert Parker's Wine Advocate and Wine Spectator On-Line than those with other titles (See Table 3). Smaller restaurants tend to rely on general food and wine magazines, such as Gourmet or Saveur, more often than larger restaurants.

Most Common Sources of Information about Wine	<i>Percent Responding Very and Somewhat Important</i>
1. Wine Spectator	92
2. Word of mouth	86
3. Customer's opinions/experience	86
4. Trade tasting	72
5. Robert Parker's Wine Advocate	72
6. Food & Wine	71
7. Events	70
8. Winery's sales representatives	65
9. Food Arts	64
10. Wine Enthusiast	64

Table 3. Most Common Sources Used by Sommeliers for Information about Wine

Discussion

Sommeliers play an important role in the marketing of wine in restaurants, in particular in smaller restaurants and in fine dining restaurants. Focusing on value for money, winery reputation, type of variety and tracking customer preference are all critical factors that sommeliers consider when selecting wines and when recommending wines to customers.

In order to have influence with the customer, the title Sommelier or Wine Steward rather than Beverage Director appears to be important to the customer. Sommeliers do not however seem to prioritize the selling techniques or inventory management that is

included in the job description. As previous studies have indicated, sommeliers continue to focus on wine knowledge and relationship marketing rather than adaptive or persuasive selling strategies. While Sommeliers continue to play an important role in identifying best products available to meet the customer’s expectations, there appears to be a need to focus greater efforts on selling techniques if increased wine sales are a desired result.

Future Research

This research was conducted to determine how to best educate hospitality undergraduates for a career in beverage management as a sommelier or wine steward. The Sommelier Viewpoint suggests that sommeliers are currently more important in smaller restaurant settings. Future research may be focused on identifying the wine training and sales techniques employed by larger restaurants along with the variance in percentage of wine sales in large versus small restaurants. In addition, researching sommeliers relationships with wineries and the influence that has on the wine list needs further examination.

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