

OUR AWARD-WINNING WINE LISTS

As the economy heats up, restaurants gear up and *Wine Spectator's* Dining Guide grows **BY JAMES MOLESWORTH**



Crush Wine Bar is a new Award of Excellence winner this year. Its bistro-style menu and moderately priced French- and Italian-focused wine list please crowds at this renovated warehouse in Toronto.

Restaurateurs are ramping up for better business these days. The lackluster economy that pushed many diners back into their own kitchens has rebounded, and high-profile openings and extensive wine cellars are returning to vogue.

"At this time last year, no one was opening," says Greg Harrington, corporate beverage director for New York-based B.R. Guest, Inc. restaurant group. "Now it seems like there's a big opening every week."

Our 24th annual *Wine Spectator* Restaurant Award list provides a guide to restaurants that take wine as seriously as you do.

In 2004, 763 restaurants entered the program for the first time, with 602 winning awards. Combining the new winners with the 2,885 restaurants (of last year's 3,360 winners) that earned renewals of their awards, this year's Dining Guide totals 3,487 wine-friendly restaurants, once again our biggest list ever.

"Just take a look around and you see lots of activity," says Tim Kopec, wine director at New York's Grand Award-winning Veritas restaurant, of the feel in the restaurant's dining room. "Our customers think 2005 is going to be a strong year, and [the restaurant industry] just follows that lead."

The Grand Award is the highest honor in *Wine Spectator's*



Your wine dollar is strong at Award of Excellence-winning Bistro M in the Park Hyatt Mendoza in Argentina, where a sizable yet inexpensive wine list and a modest corkage fee are among the draws.

Restaurant Awards program. Since 1981, the Grand Award has recognized those select restaurants that deliver unparalleled quality with their wine programs. These are destination restaurants for wine lovers, supplying cellars full of mature vintages from the best producers along with top-flight service and cuisine.

This year we honor four new Grand Award winners: Delmonico Steakhouse in Las Vegas; Tru in Chicago; Bottega del Vino in Verona, Italy; and La Pergola in Rome. For an in-depth look at each, see the profiles beginning on page 89.

It's just as difficult to maintain a Grand Award as it is to win one, and sometimes previous winners falter. In 2004, three Grand Awards were downgraded to our middle award category, the Best of Award of Excellence. This year, the total number of Grand Award winners is 88, less than 3 percent of our program's total roster. The '04 class of Grand Award winners is listed in its entirety on page 96.

While the Grand Award winners get the most glory, the lifeblood of the program is the Award of Excellence. A total of 2,791 restaurants earned our basic award this year; as a group, they account for 80 percent of all award winners. This primary award gives recognition to a broad range of restaurants—from small bistros with just 80- or 100-selection wine lists to more upscale restaurants that offer a few

hundred selections. These lists show attention to quality producers, a thematic match with the menu, and clear, concise presentation (yes, spelling counts).

Terrapin Restaurant, located in the Hudson Valley town of Rhinebeck, N.Y., is a typical Award of Excellence winner. Owner and chef Josh Kroner oversees the wine program at his restaurant, choosing wines with his self-taught palate. Since opening Terrapin six years ago (though it has been in its current location for just a year), Kroner has slowly increased his list to 150 selections.

"I didn't have much wine background before opening my own restaurant," says Kroner. "It's taken six years of learning to train my palate. But I want my wine list to reflect the eclectic nature of my food."

Adding to Terrapin's allure is its inexpensive pricing. While a restaurant's wine pricing is not among our judging criteria—only the quality of the list itself is judged—we do include pricing information in the listings as a guide for our readers.

This year, just more than 15 percent of the award winners have lists we've categorized as inexpensive. These lists, with their modest markups and with the majority of their offerings priced less than \$100 a bottle, are highlighted in green throughout the restaurant directory that begins on page 111. (Another value restaurants sometimes provide is corkage; for more on corkage etiquette and policies, see opposite page.)

Moderately priced lists, those that employ the industry standard markup (generally 2 to 2.5 times the wholesale cost) along with a range of low-priced and high-priced wines, make up nearly 70 percent of the award winners. Wine lists that we determine to be expensive—owing to higher than normal markups or a preponderance of \$100-plus bottles—constitute the remaining 15 percent.

Las Vegas' Fiamma Trattoria is another impressive newcomer. An extension of the New York-based original, Fiamma Trattoria is part of the expanding empire of Stephen Hanson's B.R. Guest, Inc. restaurant group, which now has 14 restaurants operating around the country, including eight award-winning restaurants in this year's program.

"When I first wrote [Fiamma's] wine list in June, I didn't put many high-end wines on it," says Harrington. "But by August, we saw a rebound [in business]. It's not as crazy in New York as it is in Vegas, but our average bottle sale and volume are up over last year's."

Fiamma's burgeoning business is a sign of the times. And as Americans return to dining out, the stand-alone restaurant business isn't alone in feeling the benefit. New resort properties are springing up as well, with competition coming in the form of high-end dining experiences like the ones offered by the Borgata Hotel, Casino & Spa's flagship restaurant Specchio in Atlantic City, the Mandarin Oriental New York's Asiate, and Montage Resort & Spa in Laguna Beach, Calif.—all first-time award winners in the 2004 program.

Montage, which opened last year, has built a showcase cellar for its two signature restaurants, Studio and the Loft. Wine director Christopher Coon regularly buys through the so-called gray market of collectors and other purchasing outlets for rare wine, while also bringing in wines directly from overseas wineries

(an advantage of the more liberal wine import regulations in California). The wine list for Studio touts more than 1,600 selections, with impressive depth in California, Burgundy, Rhône, Australia and Oregon, while the Loft relies on a North America-only wine list of nearly 600 selections.

Studio and the Loft each earn Best of Award of Excellence honors this year. This is our middle award category, currently held by 608 restaurants (less than 18 percent of our award winners). This award is bestowed upon those who take their wine programs to another level, offering at least several hundred selections and featuring either considerable breadth over several major wine regions or impressive depth in particular regions.

As business at home blossoms, travel abroad remains slow. Nonetheless, our foreign contingent of award winners remains robust. This year's list provides you with 488 foreign restaurants, covering 45 countries from Argentina to Vietnam.

With the strengthening euro dissuading travel to familiar haunts in Europe, American diners are being lured to other destinations. Argentina is one such place beckoning those looking to stretch their dollar. Thanks to a peso still weak after devaluation, you can select from nearly 300 Argentinean wines at very modest prices at Bistro M in the Park Hyatt Mendoza, a great way to cap off a day of visiting Mendoza-area wineries.

Alas, all is not rosy for wine-loving diners: We rejected better



To ensure that his wine list is well-matched to his cooking, owner and chef Josh Kroner personally oversees the selection at his Hudson Valley New York restaurant, Terrapin.

THE ETIQUETTE OF CORKAGE

Great restaurants offer great wines, but some are even more hospitable to their wine-loving customers, allowing them to bring their own bottles to enjoy with the meal. Most restaurants charge a fee for this service, called "corkage," while a handful allow diners to bring in wine free of charge.

Wine Spectator's Dining Guide lists the corkage fees for the restaurants that extend this courtesy. There are 1,717 of them in this year's guide, nearly half the total number of restaurants listed. Corkage fees are typically charged per 750ml bottle, so expect to pay double if you're bringing a magnum. Based on the fees reported by restaurants in the Dining Guide, about \$15 per bottle is standard, but the amount varies widely. Some restaurants do not permit diners to bring in wine; others are simply prohibited by state or local regulations.

While corkage is a clear benefit to wine drinkers, it does entail a certain etiquette on the part of the diner. If you plan to bring your own wine to a restaurant, always call ahead to confirm their corkage policy. Let the restaurant know what wines and how many bottles you plan to bring. Work out the details and the total cost in advance. Some restaurants limit the number of bottles you can bring, or will want to make sure that the wine being brought in is not one offered on the list. Generally, restaurants are more receptive when the customers' wines are special bottles, rather than readily available ones. Wine-friendly restaurants typically waive the corkage fee if you also order a bottle from their list.

Once in the restaurant, start a dialogue with the staff in order to ensure proper wine service. Offering the sommelier, chef or your server a taste of your wine can go a long way toward enhancing your dining experience. Because the restaurant loses revenue when you bring your own wine, be sure to factor their hospitality and wine service into the gratuity. —J.M.

than 20 percent of this year's new entries, a percentage consistent with previous years. While it seems absurd to even the least discriminating of wine lovers, wine lists without vintages are still far too common. Incomplete wine names, an absence of producer names and poor spelling or other mistakes also remain prevalent. As today's top wine lists get better in order to keep up with today's educated consumer, too many restaurants' wine programs remain stuck in the past.

Another bane of diners is wine lists that offer selections that are sold out, or have a warning printed on them that reads "vintages subject to change without notice." What modern-day business is without a computer database and printer to handle such things?

"We update our list daily—there are no [out-of-stock wines] on our list," says sommelier Scott Tyree of Tru. If Tru can do that with a list containing more than 1,300 selections, surely restaurants with smaller lists can be just as vigilant.

But with our standards as firm as ever, our annual list of award winners makes your search for great wine when dining out that much easier. Cheers! □