

FOOD DRINK SPIRITS

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BOTTLE ROCKETS

What's so fascinating about "interesting" wines?

Not to be categorical about it, but wine lists can be so, well, listless. Reds on the left, whites on the right and obligatory inventories of all the cabs and chards fit to print. Where's the fun in that? Fortunately, a few of DC's hipper sippers have come to rescue wine lists from oeno-ennui. Their solution? Pouring on the personality.

In their enviable role, thrill-seeking sommeliers soon grow tired of smooth, elegant wines and crave funky, unpredictable options, which they tend to file under the curious rubric "Interesting." You know the spot—it's that random collection of reds and whites on the wine list that follows no rhyme or reason, covers a huge geographical range and includes bottles suspiciously well-priced.

These standouts, according to 2941 Restaurant sommelier Stefano Cappelli, are "usually from an unexpected or unknown region or grape, well-crafted enough to compete with more expensive and known wines from much more famous areas." In other words, archaic rules about price and reputation are irrelevant in this category, and Screaming Eagle cabs, pricey pinot noirs and vintage Champagnes need not apply.

But in this grape game, DC wine wizards avoid discounting all *vins français*. They do pass over the prestigious classified growths and Grands Crus, though, and gravitate towards wines from regions like the chic yet still off-the-beaten-path Languedoc-Roussillon, where rustic reds reign. Vidalia's Ed Jenks is partial to the 1999 Mas Cal Demoura, a beguiling red blend with cassis, brambles, earth, leather and cocoa. Corduroy's Ferhat Yalçin also hits up this southwest region, stocking his ample 12,000-bottle cellar with offerings like the light-bodied, Négrette-based Château Bouissel from Fronton, near the Spanish border. Although these gems-in-the-rough tend to be wallet friendly, Jenks believes this may make them a harder sell for skeptics. So he works the floor gaining guests' trust, proving that a lower price tag can denote distinctiveness—not mediocrity.

Seeking this element of adventure often dictates that you equate the unrecognizable with the unforgettable. Cappelli peppers his list with the exotic Basque Txacolina, a zingy white screaming for a seafood or salty charcuterie pairing, as well as the spicy and aromatic white Greek Moschofilero. Jenks opts for Zweigelt, Austria's answer to French Beaujolais. Other grapes, like Blaufränkisch, Agiorgitiko and Rotgipfler may be practically unpronounceable, but sublime satisfaction awaits



Corduroy's Ferhat Yalçin cellars some fabulous under-the-radar vintages.

tipplers willing to tackle them. Yalçin is an ace at demystifying exceptional, out-of-sight bottles so they don't remain out-of-mind. Inox wine director John Wabeck offers smart suggestions, then takes his personal proclivity out of the equation to give diners the ultimate decision. "You have to read the guests—sometimes they don't want liters of Müller-Thurgau just because I happen to think it's the new cool thing."

The appearance of that rolling cheese cart typically ushers in a selection of fortified sweet sips from Portugal. But more interesting options arise here, as well. By employing port grapes in new ways, Portugal is coming into its own as a go-to region for dry reds, too. Wabeck prefers those from the Douro, like Dow's Vale do Bomfim, with bright fruit and enough wood, he says, "to make me feel naughty for drinking it." Portuguese wines are approachable and easy, if not necessarily complex or age-worthy. Consider them your just desserts.

But even adventure-loving DC wine lovers demand balance in the glass, just as the globe-trotting sommelier seeks it on the menu. A ho-hum list weighted with only popular varietals and regions inevitably leads to bottle boredom, but one sprinkled with the unfamiliarly appealing grips and amuses the palate. Admittedly, while not every quest for an undiscovered wine gem leads to the holy grail, the risks involved are minimal. Next go-round, just grab another *interesting* bottle. ■

Inox, 1800 Tysons Blvd., McLean; Corduroy, 1122 Ninth St., NW; Vidalia, 1990 M St., NW; 2941 Restaurant, 2941 Fairview Park Dr., Falls Church.