

Tbilisi 2022 Abstract Submission

Title

Restaurants, Wine Lists, and Culture

I want to submit an abstract for:

Conference Presentation

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Keywords

restaurants, wine list, wine pricing, wine service, cultural differences

Research Question

In light of the evolution of restaurants over time, what are the varieties of roles for wine lists in restaurants across cultures?

Methods

Literature review, survey data analysis

Results

Exposition of varied uses of and roles for restaurant wine lists, agenda of questions for future research

Abstract

INTRODUCTION

Dining as an arm's length transaction outside the home dates from ancient times; when available, wine probably accompanied food from the beginning. Early "pairings" may have reflected primarily safety and local access; but developments in food hygiene, transportation, and taste mean that pairing has become more discretionary and interesting. What considerations influence the provision of wine with food and the choices offered?

Rawson and Shore (2019) note the emergence of commensality as an event-organising principle was critical—for example, the wine-centric Athenian symposium (Ibid. 11). Over time, eating together outside the home begat the restaurant industry in most cultures; alcoholic beverages—especially wine—have played a central role. Just as the

restaurant food experience varies widely by culture, so does wine's role.

Yet cultural analysis of restaurants has given far more attention to food. A prominent history of restaurants (Spang 2000) presents the original definition of "restaurant" (from the French restaurer—to restore, re-establish): "Food or remedy that has the property of restoring lost strength to a sickly or tired individual." (p. viii) Spang's narrative begins with the 18th Century emergence in Paris of vendors producing and selling restorative preparations (e.g., consommé)—a prominent health food in the city at the time.

What is surprising about Spang's history is that it barely mentions the definition's third sentence: "Wine, brandy, and cordials are all good restaurants for those whose spirits are drained." (Ibid.) The narrative acknowledges wine's role in that evolution—among the safest and most available accompaniments to food as that rose to prominence in Parisian restaurants; yet wine is absent from the index. Of course, eventually recognition of the complementarity of food and wine was taken for granted in the best restaurants. Rawson and Shore's more international history (2019) acknowledges this but limits discussion to a few notes.

Overlooking wine's role in the evolution and analysis of dining out may reflect several tendencies: (a) the complexity of understanding wine's variety and ever-changing qualities and the challenge of wine pairing and (b) the difficulty of understanding how one integrates wine choices and pricing into the more obvious goal of offering good cooking.

We address this neglect by exploring cultural differences in wine's role in dining out. We also investigate cultural differences in restaurant wine policy and pricing. Our focus is restaurant behaviour rather than consumer behaviour (e.g., Jaeger et al. 2010, Corsi et al. 2012). We analyse data from the Livat-Remaud (2018) dataset (hereafter, L-R) – as well as considerable literature and anecdotal evidence. We discuss first a restaurant's interest in a wine list and then on-premise drinking as cultural consumption. Next, we discuss wine list development and complementary service. We then discuss wine list pricing before a concluding section.

THE RESTAURANT CONTEXT

Understanding wine lists begins with understanding restaurants and the importance of hospitality. We adopt Symons' (2013) elementary definition in the context of the evolution of restaurants: "the action of a household in meeting the basic needs of a non-member or non-members" (p. 250). The modern restaurant began as a household enterprise undertaking the care and feeding of guests—usually travellers.

With the "invention of the restaurant" (Spang 2000)—Paris in the late 18th Century—wine accompanied food as a safe beverage. Analysing 850,000 New York City (NYC) menu items, Masset and Weisskopf (2021) saw wine offered routinely on NYC restaurants in 1865. Similar enterprises in neighbouring non-wine cultures might eventually offer wine as the institution evolved, but initially they provided their own local alternatives (e.g., fermented beverages in English taverns).

A theme in understanding restaurant evolution (e.g., Symons 2013) is how the nature of its hospitality has evolved with particular interest in the sincerity of the hospitality—the host's genuine dedication to care and feeding. In the evolution of the restaurant as social institution, how has it become more transactional, driven by profit at the expense of true hospitality whose reward includes pleasing the "non-member"? This dichotomy suggests Adam Smith's complementary themes in his *Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Appreciating this point illuminates the varied roles of wine lists discussed below. A host dedicated to guests' happiness may have a different list from one maximizing profit.

OUTLINE OF THE DISCUSSION

1) WHY A WINE LIST

- a. Relevance to restaurant performance
- b. Producing the list
- c. Food/wine pairing
- d. Globalisation and localism
- e. List contents

2) WINE SERVICE

- a. The sommelier effect
- b. Staff training

3) WINE COSTS AND PRICING

- a. The puzzle of restaurant wine pricing
- b. Rules of thumb and other pricing strategies

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Offering wine with food—through a list or otherwise—and all related decisions reflect numerous cultural influences. Indeed, offering meals commercially is itself culturally conditioned, and offering accompanying alcohol may be both culturally (and legally) forbidden.

Matching food with complementary wines seems paramount in producing wine lists but wine choices need not flow from food choices. While local cuisine and wines likely evolved together in regions where both have become culturally significant, wine may be the highlight with menus designed around that. L-R data suggest that larger, more expensive restaurants that highlight food pairing and rare wines have longer lists; but the data are too aggregated to indicate the role of the local wine culture in supporting those priorities.

We discuss various approaches to dining out with wine—from utilitarian feeding to drama and enchantment—and note when we find locational differences. However, despite the considerable literature discussed, we lack any systematic study of the key cultural parameters of the dining experience such as the role of tradition and ritual, acceptable gender roles (e.g., meal preparation—female at home, male in restaurants), and reverence for either local or exotic specialties. Attention to wine may require staff wine expertise commensurate with the list's complexity, and we have discussed several objectives it might serve aside from profitability. However, we lack systematic evidence of how that role is filled across cultures. We also wonder whether the appeal is actual expertise or instead a “master of ceremonies” directing the dining production.

Culture might be defined here in reference to restaurant types (i.e., as with corporate cultures) or in terms of the restaurant's community. The community can be rural or urban, for instance; it can be a wine-producing region or not. Indeed, the restaurant's community could reveal significant differences in types of restaurants and related wine sourcing and list design. Clearly defining the community's wine culture would facilitate investigating differences in wine programmes. It would require detailed disaggregated data. Related to that, we lack data on the much more numerous and more economically significant small, local restaurants, given that previous research has focussed on mid- and upscale restaurants.

Conspicuous by its absence is comparative research on the restaurant experience when alcohol is banned.

Numerous questions arise—for example, the emergence of segregated visitor-resident restaurant sectors, the relative prices of and consumer satisfaction from dining out, differences in cuisine, and the emergence of black markets.

Finally, public policy constrains restaurant wine programmes—for example, regulated hours of operation, age of customers, and off-premise sales. We want to understand better the evolution of such regulations and how they reflect cultural differences informing politics.

References (83 entries; excluded here for brevity)

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