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The Sommelier Side Hustle: Winemaking

Not content to merely recommend bottles, many sommeliers are getting into the business of making wine. Having sampled the results, our wine columnist offers some recommendations of her own



ILLUSTRATION: JOAO FAZENDA



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By

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IN THE documentary “Somm 3,” the latest in a series of sommelier-focused films, the somms aren’t just tasting and recommending wines—they’re making them, too. The film features two blind tastings of Pinot Noirs. In one, held in New York, the participants are top sommeliers such as Aldo Sohm, wine director of Le Bernardin restaurant and partner in Aldo Sohm Wine Bar. The other tasting, held in Paris, includes former sommelier Fred Dame and two British wine writers, Steven Spurrier and Jancis Robinson. Spoiler alert: One of the favorite wines is a California Pinot made by a sommelier.

So as not to further spoil the surprise for those who plan to see “Somm 3,” I won’t reveal the wine or the sommelier who made it. Suffice it to say, this Pinot Noir has since sold out, and the sommelier who made it no longer works the floor. Yet many sommeliers, including Mr. Sohm, continue to do two jobs: one in a restaurant selling the wines of others and another producing and selling wines of their own.

This dual life can be hectic, said Josh Nadel, beverage director of the New York-based NoHo Hospitality Group and consultant of Gothic Wine, produced in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. Mr. Nadel helms the beverage programs of all 12 NoHo restaurants across the U.S. and has consulted on Gothic Wine’s operation in Oregon since 2009. When we spoke, he was in Detroit, opening the group’s latest restaurant, San Morello, in the Shinola Hotel.

While Gothic Wine’s initial production was quite small, the winery now produces around 4,000 cases annually, including two Pinots, a Chardonnay and a rosé, distributed in 13 states. Managing sales and distribution is a particularly challenging part of the job, said Mr. Nadel, who spends a fair amount of time in Oregon though he does not actually make the wine. He doesn’t own a vineyard either but purchases fruit from top Willamette Valley growers.

Mr. Nadel has noticed more sommeliers getting involved in producing wine. In some cases, he believes, young sommeliers simply want their names on a label, with little idea how hard the business can be. He’s happy to share his expertise: “I say, ‘Show me your five-year plan.’ ”

Sommelier Bobby Stuckey and chef Lachlan MacKinnon-Patterson own three Colorado restaurants—Frasca Food and Wine and Pizzeria Locale in Boulder and Tavernetta in Denver—and also make 65,000 cases of wine a year under the Scarpetta label along with a group of investors, some of whom were their restaurant customers. Messrs. Stuckey and MacKinnon-Patterson visit Italy four times a year and are involved in the wines' creation. Though they do have a sales team, Mr. Stuckey travels frequently on behalf of Scarpetta—when he's not on the floor of one of the three restaurants in the role of sommelier. When I asked him about the reception from other sommeliers, he replied, "It's 100% harder to sell to other somms."

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Mr. Sohm concurred. "What I've found is that not everyone likes my wine," he said, referring to the Grüner Veltliner he produces in his native Austria in conjunction with winemaker Gerhard Kracher. Mr. Sohm is perhaps too modest. His Sohm & Kracher wines can be found on some of the best restaurant lists in New York and around the country and, unlike many sommelier-made wines, in retail wine shops as well.

Mr. Sohm features his wines on the Le Bernardin and Aldo Sohm Wine Bar lists but does not call them out as his own. "I've had a very good response from people who know that I'm involved and others who don't," he said. "They're part of the Austrian wines [on the list] without any special mention."

He features wines by fellow somms, too, and not merely as a matter of courtesy: He applies the same rigorous criteria he does to any wine. He rattled off names of sommeliers whose wines made Le Bernardin's list, including Mr. Stuckey, Thomas Pastuszak of NoMad restaurant in New York and Greg Harrington, a sommelier who has left restaurants to make wine full time.

Unlike many sommeliers who get into the business of making wine, Jeff Lindsay-Thorsen of RN74 in Seattle actually serves as winemaker for his W.T. Vintners range, including several Syrahs and a Chenin Blanc. He works in a warehouse winery space in Woodinville, Wash., four or five days a week and the same number of nights at RN74.

Mr. Lindsay-Thorsen noted that some sommelier-winemakers he knew gave up on winemaking after a vintage or two. But he wants to continue doing both jobs as long as he can. He believes his work as a sommelier has helped him as a winemaker. “I get immersed in the world’s greatest wines, and I’m fearful of giving that up,” he said.

Eric Railsback, a partner in Lieu Dit and Railsback Frères wineries in Santa Ynez, Calif., said much the same thing. Mr. Railsback has worked as a sommelier in many restaurants, including RN74’s original San Francisco location. “You get a different perspective,” he said.

When we talked, Mr. Railsback was on his way from San Francisco via Los Angeles to El Dorado, Ark., where he has been working at the Griffin Restaurant a few days a week since November. He designed the wine list for the restaurant and is training the staff, as well as developing future retail and wine-bar projects in New York and Chicago. Mr. Railsback also spends a great deal of time on the road selling Lieu Dit and Railsback Frères wines—and sometimes struggles with making calls on fellow sommeliers. “A lot of your friends are not your best customers because you don’t want to bother them,” he said.

I tasted a number of sommelier-made wines in the course of reporting this story, and aside from one or two less-than-exciting bottles, they were quite good. Though they were, on the whole, hard to find in shops, I located a good many somm-made wines at New York’s Verve Wine, which also sells wines online.

Co-founder/partner Dustin Wilson, a master sommelier and alum of Eleven Madison Park in New York, carries quite a few wines made by fellow sommeliers. The bottles

are “thoughtfully curated by your neighborhood sommelier,” notes a sign near the entrance to the store. “We include it to imply a level of service that our guests can expect and the [quality] of products that we carry,” said Mr. Wilson, on the presumption that knowing a sommelier selected—or made—the wine will inspire confidence.

OENOFILE / Worthy Wines Made—And Recommended—by Sommeliers



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (4)

1. 2017 Sohm & Kracher ‘Lion’ Grüner Veltliner Niederösterreich \$21

Sommelier Aldo Sohm says this is the best vintage he and his partner have made to date. The Austrian bottling is a pleasure to drink—crisp and lively with aromas of white pepper and herb.

2. 2015 W.T. Vintners Boushey Vineyard Syrah Yakima Valley \$40

The Boushey Vineyard is one of the most famous in Washington state, and Jeff Lindsay-Thorsen has crafted a notably lithe Syrah with notes of olive and dark fruit and a mineral edge.

3. 2017 Railsback Frères Rosé 'Les Rascasses' Santa Ynez Valley \$24

Sommelier Eric Railsback and his partners had the famed Domaine Tempier rosé from Provence in mind when they fashioned this very dry, well-balanced, Grenache-dominant rosé.

4. 2016 Scarpetta Sauvignon Blanc Friuli Colli Orientali \$44

This stylish Sauvignon Blanc from the Friuli region of Italy is one of the best of the wines sommelier Bobby Stuckey and his partners make. It's a wine with layers of flavor and a zesty acidity.

5. 2014 Gothic Wine 'Nevermore' Pinot Noir Willamette Valley \$20

The 2014 vintage produced many excellent Oregon Pinot Noirs, including this one from sommelier Josh Nadel. It's a bright, savory wine with notes of dark cherry and spice.