

Creating the Private Club Wine List

M O N O G R A P H

By

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Executive Summary

Private club wine lists are different from those used in other segments of the hospitality industry in that they must meet higher and broader expectations due to the demanding nature of private club members. Club wine lists should offer high quality, good value, and an appropriate, well-chosen selection to meet the increasing sophistication of club members. Noted wine writer Robert Parker (2003) summarized the recent evolution of wine programs:

“The sophistication of restaurant wine lists and wine-by-the-glass programs, both of which barely existed in 1978, continues to increase. In 1978, it was practically impossible to find a list that wasn’t dominated by expensive Champagne, Bordeaux, or Burgundy, and that included more than a few casual selections from the New World. This is no longer an intelligent approach, and the growth in serious wine lists, as well as the rise of knowledgeable, noncondescending sommeliers, has been significant.”

The objective of this monograph is to provide a focused, best practice document that club managers, who might be

embarking on their first foray into wine list development, can use for benchmarking. The monograph will be presented in four parts that will investigate best practices when selecting wine, pricing wine, marketing wine, and for wine inventory management and storage.

The data to support this monograph was obtained from a variety of sources. A survey was mailed to all members of the CMAA International Wine Society. An industry magazine, *Wine & Spirits*, publishes an annual poll of the most popular restaurant wines in the United States. The 2003 and 2004 versions of this poll were used to validate the theory that national brand recognition cannot be ignored when assembling a wine list.

The monograph development also drew upon numerous magazine articles and several books written by industry experts. As well, three leading sommeliers contributed input through personal interviews about developing a modern, exemplary wine program.

Common themes emerged from the survey data, interviews, and periodicals, magazines, and books. It is important to first know the type of club you are managing and research the local market before embarking on a club wine acquisition program.

The context for a club wine program is built on member feedback, historic sales, local market preferences, and national brand name recognition. One must taste each type of wine

before purchasing it to assess its balance and compatibility with food. If a club specializes in a type or style of cuisine, then the weight of the food should match the weight of a club's wine choices. The seasonings in a club's cuisine should also have matches on the wine list. Club managers responding to the survey indicated that the staff member most knowledgeable about wines at a club should select them. (This is usually the general manager or the clubhouse manager.) Sommeliers warned clubs to stay away from "grocery store" wines.

Wine futures, allocated wines, and older bottles make a list distinctive. A good wine program is aided by developing rapport with wholesalers, attending auctions to purchase hard-to-find wines, and working to acquire "allocated wines" (those which distributors withhold as favors for their best customers). Specialty retailers are another source for acquiring hard-to-find wines.

Articles in some periodicals urged a bold and innovative selection process focusing on both traditional wine-growing regions and hot new emerging regions that are producing less fruity, more acidic, food-friendly wines.

Research noted that United States wines comprise about 55 percent of those on club wine lists nationally. Professionals should be mindful to avoid acquiring bottles that feature

uncommon grape varieties or those produced by obscure, unknown producers.

Affordability and value are the key elements when pricing wines. Most clubs used a two times mark-up and then a sliding scale after \$40 retail price per bottle as their pricing philosophy. Club wine programs averaged a 44 percent product cost. By-the-glass programs generally poured six to seven ounces per portion, and the price of a by-the-glass offering was generally obtained by dividing the regular wine list retail price of the bottle by four.

Magazine articles encouraged the use of several different price points on a wine list, and several suggested that club wines be priced lower than prices found at competing restaurants because members believe membership dues entitle them to a great value. When marketing wine, about two-thirds of clubs use two methods: wait staff suggestions at the point of contact or simply placing a list on the table as diners arrive. Sommeliers suggest that an enthusiastic, patient, friendly (not aggressive) server is the key to marketing. Many sources indicated that smaller, well-chosen lists were preferable to large, cumbersome, and more intimidating lists. They agreed on a traditional list format with wines organized by region and varietal. Lists should be well-proofed with readable font. A wine list is a work in progress and should have the flexibility to retool often, especially since vintages change often.

Club managers agreed that selling incentives are effective. However, a majority of clubs didn't use them with staff because members thought that aggressive servers had no place in a private club. The survey revealed that 100 to 120 selections were the norm for a club's list, and that 12 to 18 regions or varietal sections were on those lists. The sommeliers and several magazine articles thought that better quality stemware led to higher levels of satisfaction among wine consumers.

Many publications revealed common themes on storage techniques. Wines should ideally be stored at 50 to 59 degrees Fahrenheit and 60 percent to 80 percent humidity, in a dark, vibration-free environment. The preferred bottle position is horizontal. Leftover wine in bottles used for by-the-glass programs can be protected by a cruvinet system or argon spray. To prevent overstocking, clubs should purchase wine in small lots at quantities relevant to the previous year's sales.

Survey respondents indicated that proper storage was important to a distinct wine program; however, sometimes a tight budget or lack of space prevents this. Magazine articles and the survey results encouraged selling white wines in their youth and noted that 95 percent of all wine is meant to be consumed within its first three years. *Club Gourmet Magazine* suggests that a proper inventory value should be approximately 75 percent of a club's annual wine revenue.

The purpose of wine is to enhance the dining experience, and club managers should realize that the sale of wine is rarely outside the context of food. Wine and food were meant to be consumed in tandem. If club managers commit to the above best practice techniques, then clubs will be able to showcase a high quality wine program.

Statement of the Problem

Private club wine lists are necessarily different from those used in other segments of the hospitality industry. They must offer wines of higher quality and more value because of the private club culture of demanding members. This monograph fulfills a need for inexperienced club managers as there currently is no existing resource for them to employ while developing an exemplary wine list that is useful for most club cultures. This monograph provides a focused, best-practice document that a club manager can use to develop a club's wine list.

The author has managed private club food and beverage departments and has noticed that many wine lists were not created in a systematic or professional manner. The purpose of this monograph is to provide a tool for other club managers to enable them to increase member satisfaction by providing benchmarks for wine list development, pricing strategies, storage, and marketing approaches. Poorly conceived wine lists with high prices likely undermine the very reason for their creation: to sell more wine.

That problem was, perhaps, best stated by the management of the St. Regis Hotel in New York in 1935 (Grossman, 1940):

“Poor wine lists and high prices were seriously retarding the use of wine and thus impeding the

process of gracious and temperate living. In offering well-chosen wines at moderate cost, we believe we are performing a public service and at the same time exhibiting intelligent self interest. We expected, in short, to make up the difference between a small profit per bottle and a large profit per bottle by greatly increasing the volume of our sales.”

This message is at the heart of this monograph, which is focused on helping club managers who are inexperienced in selecting and merchandising wine as they create their club's wine list. Frequently the under-educated food and beverage manager in a private club is asked to prepare a wine list without any point of reference. Consequently, a biased “friendly” purveyor and/or one's instincts become the primary guidelines. The monograph will substantiate the major positive points of exemplary wine lists through the analysis of survey data gained from more than 120 club managers in survey responses.

The intent of the topic is to provide recommendations to all private club managers in North America for the planning of an effective wine program that addresses development, pricing, marketing, storage, and management, with the goal of increasing member satisfaction.

Review of the Literature

Written information was reviewed relative to the four primary aspects of this study: wine selection, wine pricing, wine marketing, and wine inventory management and storage.

Wine Selection

Brew Pub magazine author Dawnell Smith (1999) points out that good rapport with one's wholesale distributors is important when assembling a wine list and that grocery store wines do not sell well in restaurants: "Customers like the more unusual wines." She also recommends "exploring wines through an unbiased retail specialist or consultant."

Barry Peters (2004), writing for *Club Gourmet* magazine, makes several points. To select appropriate wines, "first, determine what is going to be deleted from your current wine cellar. Doing some competitive research from other restaurants and establishments in your area will help you determine which wines are selling well locally. Invite your local wine purveyors and distributors to meet with you and conduct a tasting. Have them provide you with information about which wines are selling the best in your part of the country. Challenge the wine purveyors to prepare the best possible wine list for your club based upon the wines that they carry. One of the best sources of information about wine is the *Wine Spectator*."

Bill Channels (2001) points out that any good wine list matches well with the menu it accompanies. A wine list for a French restaurant will not suit that of a pizza parlor. "To me, an ultimate wine list means affordable, well-chosen selections," he says. He further states that the list should be elegant and cover a wide geographic area while offering a variety of grape styles.

Restaurant Wine Publisher Ronn Weigand (2000) states: "Make sure your list is balanced among types, styles, and regions of origin." A list should have several wines that complement a club's food. He further insists that expectations of the wine-drinking public include the most popular varietals, especially Chardonnay, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Magazine columnist Max Ariza (2003) notes that wine lists must be accurate and fresh. The wine selection should include different styles plus eclectic, unusual, and emerging choices such as Albarino, Veltliner, and Rousanne/Marsanne. He encourages wine buyers to always taste the wine so there will be a reference point for food pairings.

Robert M. Parker (2003, p. 135), unquestionably the single most important wine critic in the world, reminds us that there are many great values in wine and to search out promising wines in off-the-beaten-path zones like the Rhone Valley, Santa Barbara in California, Sicily, and Spain. He notes that wine lists have never been so sophisticated and their sophistication will continue to grow due to a demanding public. He cites several

varietals that he believes to be food friendly, such as Rioja, Sangiovese, Malbec, Shiraz, and Grenache.

Another magazine columnist, Steve Fox (1993), contributes the following suggestions: “Key the wine to the cuisine and offer a balance of styles and price points. There should be at least one wine to complement every dish on the menu.” For most restaurants, two or three dozen wines are adequate, but for sophisticated operations, a broader selection should be offered. Regarding selection, Fox goes on to state that “well-marketed, national brands may cost more, but often generate more consumer purchases. Lesser-known wines, whether because they are new brands, new wine styles, or are marketed without an advertising budget, are usually cheaper and can offer great value. They don’t sell automatically, however. The best wine lists will offer a balance of the two types.”

Steve Olson (1992), then the beverage manager for the Mayflower Inn in Washington, Connecticut, makes the following observations. “First and foremost, the purpose of wine in a restaurant is to enhance the dining experience.” He notes that a list should be well-rounded with both popular wines (Chardonnays and Cabernets) and food friendly-wines. He states, “I write my wine list to offer food-friendly wines that are drinkable today. I seek out wines that are balanced with refreshing acidity, richness of fruit, and firm structure.”

Charles Laverick (2000), President of the Chicago-based Beverage Testing Institute (the largest full-time beverage reviewing body in the world), makes the following observations regarding wine list selections with food in mind. "Recognize the fact that cooler climates, such as those in Washington, Oregon, and New York, naturally produce wines that are higher in acidity and lower in alcohol than most California selections. High acidity levels and elevated alcohol will kill most foods at the table and fatigue the palate. Before you put an oaky, buttery Chardonnay with 15 percent alcohol on the list, see if it really goes with any of your menu items. A wine program must be tailored to the menu and pay particularly close attention to regionality and theme."

Another writer, Jean Reilly (2003), summarizes the importance of designing a wine list with an establishment's food in mind: "The most important determinant of which wines your restaurant serves, of course, is the type of food the wines are meant to match. Given the current trend for Asian and Latin-influenced preparations, this has become more difficult, so sommeliers should spend adequate time tasting wine samples with an establishment's cuisine."

Andrea Immer (2002) is a Master Sommelier who has written books and articles dealing with her thoughts on wine. Segments of her book were used to reinforce the following points in the monograph. First, she writes that "Ninety-five

percent of the quality wines in the marketplace are meant to be consumed within three years of their harvest.” This is important to note since lists must be kept fresh and up-dated. When discussing trends, she notes that the wine buying public is increasingly sophisticated. Speaking of quality and value, we should consider Italian, Australian, and Spanish wines but the core American varietals, Chardonnay and Cabernet, still dominate our lists. She writes that the wine public is becoming more adventuresome, looking for new offerings.

In *Grossman’s Guide to Wine, Spirits and Beers* (Grossman) there is a quote from the management of the old St. Regis Hotel in New York in 1935 that still rings true today: “Well-chosen, quality offerings are the backbone to an excellent wine list.”

The chefs and management of the Cordon Bleu in Paris have written a best practices book called *Wine Essentials*. (2001) Some suggestions to selecting and purchasing wines were to avoid protruding corks, reject sticky bottles and partial fills, and to avoid wines that one knows have not been properly warehoused.

Wine & Spirits (2003, April) Magazine, an industry monthly, publishes an annual poll of restaurants across the nation that determines the fifty most popular specific brand bottles of wine selling in those restaurants. The April 2003 issue is used to compare what is selling in restaurants to the club-specific

survey of the same type. The usefulness of the *Wine & Spirits* survey is to lend credence to the theory that club wine lists cannot ignore the very best-selling brands in the national market. The very best-selling bottles appear at the top of both surveys.

Pricing Wine

Wine Enthusiast editor and publisher Adam Strum (2002) makes an important point about wine pricing and markup: “In 1978, Kevin Zraly devised a sliding scale of markups. It was never a precise, mathematical formula, but in general it worked like this: If a bottle cost the restaurant \$10 or under, it might be priced at three times that amount. If it cost \$10 to \$15, it would be priced at two and a half times that amount. And so on.

In other words, the lower the cost, the higher the markup. It was not a precise formula, because, as Zraly quickly learned, the important thing is not a formula. The important thing is to price a wine at such a level that people want to buy it. At one end of the scale, customers in a fine-dining situation are suspicious of a bottle of wine priced at \$6.00. At the other end of the scale—and Zraly is the first to say so—\$50 or more for a bottle of wine is a lot of money, no matter who you are. The artistry and excellence of a sommelier, he believes, is in finding a \$10 bottle of wine that tastes like a \$20 bottle.”

Fellow Club Manager John Zerega (2003) states that pricing makes a statement to the membership. Therefore, wine should be priced fairly. He quotes Club Manager Gregg Patterson as saying, "Value is a watchword." Zerega's pricing philosophy is as follows: "We mark up each bottle 1.75 times and max out at \$30 per bottle profit." He thinks that, for example, selling a \$25 bottle of wine for \$45 is the most realistic approach.

Author Jean Reilly (2003) suggests several tips that sommeliers use to price their wine lists. "Smart buying lets us pass on value to our customers. Buying large volumes of a particular house wine enables the wine director to negotiate a discount and place higher markups on the wines that tend to move more quickly." She also quotes Sommelier Daniel Johannes giving a tip on how to slow sales on rare wines to keep them on the list for preferred customers: Mark them up at a higher than normal level.

One expert suggests a pricing philosophy that is a tiered approach. (Peters, 2004) "As a general rule of thumb, the mid-range wine by the bottle on your list should be priced at approximately 2 1/4 times the cost, higher cost wines should be priced at 1 3/4 times the cost, and the lower cost wines should be priced at 3 times the cost. For example: A wine that costs \$10 a bottle should be sold at \$22.50, a wine that costs \$25 a

bottle should be sold at \$44, and a wine that costs \$6.50 per bottle should be sold at \$19.50.”

Steve Olson (1992) makes the following pricing suggestion: “First, be sensitive to your menu prices and average check. Be aware of your competition at both retail and other restaurants. Finally, volume of sales is more important than pouring costs.”

Another writer, David Holstrom (2004), states that “more and more retailers formulate a reasonably priced wine list as part of their business plan.” He goes on to add that “Your guests don’t care about your costs, they do care about the price they pay for wine. The key is to see that all pricing decisions enhance the price-to-value relationship.” Regarding allocated wines, he states that “the highest price the market will bear is appropriate for selections that are difficult to obtain or highly allocated.”

And finally, Steve Fox (1993) has the following opinion on pricing: “In general, the lower the bottle cost, the higher the markup factor should be. Although a more expensive wine should have a lower profit percentage, its dollar profit should be higher than that of a cheap wine.”

In the summer of 2003, then CMAA Wine Society president Kirk Reese, CCM, commissioned a survey of Wine Society members that, among other results, reported the average selling price for a club-featured bottle of wine. Sixty-five percent of respondents answered that their club-featured

bottles sold for \$28 or less. This result was compared to *Wine & Spirits* magazine's survey result of a restaurant-sold bottle average price for the same year: an astonishing \$73.37.

Wine Marketing

Wine marketing expert Michael Flynn (2002) emphasizes that "wine-savvy customers expect cleanly organized, well-proofed lists." He says that listing wines by country and region is sensible with varietal breakdowns and sub-regions forming secondary categories. Finally, he insists that no wine list is ever finished. One must always build in the flexibility to retool often. Vintages change, new releases appear, and bad bottles must be discarded rather than sold.

Another writer (Thompson, 2003) interviewed several club managers and emphasized the following points: Club members love a great value. Purchase in small lots to avoid carrying a large inventory. "Club members don't want the same old thing. Focus on eclectic wines that you don't find on every street corner."

Sante magazine, a monthly industry periodical, runs a column in nearly every issue that deals with wine pricing and merchandising. In one issue, Master Sommelier Catherine Fallis (2003) tells readers that "enthusiasm sells more wine." She emphasizes that servers should be upbeat but not pushy or aggressive when approaching a table to sell wine.

Ronn Weigand (1993) stated that 80 percent of all wines sold in U.S. restaurants were American wines, and, therefore, unless customers have a high interest in imports, the focus should be on American wines. Other recommendations included: Cover various price points, increase accessibility and affordability, and be bold and innovative.

Sue Reilly (2003) emphasizes that “a bigger wine list is not always better; there is no reason for style repetition such as 20 vintages of a Bordeaux.” She encourages us to “step outside the box and let customers know the incredible diversity of the world of wine,” and she encourages well-chosen, short lists.

In a section of Hugh Johnson's (1998) book, he discusses the notion of a good wine list being fully specific about the origin, vintage date, and producer of each bottle. A list that is well-organized suggests that it is well-cared for and is revised regularly.

Charles Castlemore (2004) is quoted as endorsing upgraded glassware from a manufacturer like Austrian crystal producer Riedel to help one's wine marketing program.

Wine Storage and Inventory Management

Steve Heimoff (1992) discusses the merits of storing wines in a cellar at 55 degrees Fahrenheit and maintaining a steady temperature. (Temperature fluctuation will lead to cork damage, which leads to product degradation.)

Barry Peters (2004) makes the following point about inventory management: "A good starting point for your wine dollar inventory is to multiply your annual sales by .75."

Max Ariza (2003) says that a 55 degree Fahrenheit temperature, 70 percent humidity, and the absence of light and vibration are important for a wine storage area. He also discusses the preservation of partially poured bottles of wine and endorses the use of an argon spray to blanket the unused portion of wine in a bottle. This protects it from oxygen which degrades exposed wine.

Hugh Johnson has been called by some "the greatest wine writer in the world." His book, *How to Enjoy Your Wine* (1998), was written to help the wine-buying public buy and store wine. Sections of his work were used to reinforce certain storage recommendations: Ideal temperature is between 50 and 59 degrees Fahrenheit, humidity should be between 60 percent and 80 percent, and vibration is not healthy. He also notes the importance of darkness since light will age wine prematurely.

The Cordon Bleu book (2001) reinforces storage tips of 50 to 59 degrees Fahrenheit, 70 percent to 80 percent humidity with light- and vibration-free conditions and some air circulation or ventilation. Horizontal bottle storage is also encouraged.

Methodology

Information for this monograph was generated from four general sources. First, numerous books, periodicals, trade journals, and magazines were researched for opinions about building a wine program in commercial food-service operations and private clubs.

Second, a survey was sent to 280 members of the Club Managers Association of America International Wine Society. The survey explored the following five areas of a private club's wine program:

- How do you choose wines for your bottle and by-the-glass programs?
- What varietals and geographic regions make up the bottle portion of your club's wine list?
- What formula or pricing strategy do you use to sell your bottled wine and your by-the-glass wine?
- How do you market your bottled wine list?
- Is proper storage a factor in your wine program?

One hundred and twenty-three usable responses (44 percent) were returned. The survey results provide many common themes that helped formulate the recommendations in this monograph. (A copy of the survey is provided in Appendix A of this monograph.)

Third, individual interviews were conducted with three sommeliers, each of whom have extensive private club experience: Virginia Phillip (Breakers Hotel and Breakers West Club of Palm Beach, Florida), Lisa Taylor (Cherokee Town and Country Club of Atlanta) and 15-year sommelier and radio talk show host, Mark Spivak (Boca Raton, Florida). Mark does a once-a-week radio show on wine. The interview questions and themes that commonly arose from their answers are included in Appendix B of this monograph.

Fourth, the results of two independent surveys were used to reinforce selected findings in the customized survey for this monograph. *Wine & Spirits* magazine's Annual Survey of the nation's most popular restaurant wines, which appears in the April 2003 issue of *Wine & Spirits* magazine supported the position that national brand name recognition should not be ignored when assembling a club's wine list. (See Appendix C.)

The Club Managers Association of America surveys its member club operations every two years. In the 2002 Club Operations Survey, data compares general club demographics nationally to the club demographics of the survey used to collect data for this monograph. The demographic data from the CMAA Club survey is used here to substantiate the demographic data from the monograph survey. (See Appendix E.)

Club Manager Survey Results

The survey mailed to 280 members of the Club Managers Association of America International Wine Society included eight demographic questions. The purpose of these questions was to assess whether a representative cross-section of North American clubs was surveyed when compared to a benchmark survey administered by the CMAA in 2000. Nearly 44 percent of the surveys were returned (123 of 280). As seen in Figure #1, the average size of the club in terms of membership, the average annual food revenue and the average initiation fees of the clubs in the two surveys were similar. This helps support the notion that the monograph respondents were from clubs that were representative of the club industry during the summer of 2003.

Figure #1		
Comparison of Respondent's Clubs in Monograph Survey and CMAA Operations Survey		
	2003 Monograph Survey Average	2002 Club Operations Survey National Average
Number of club memberships	730	757
Annual dues	\$4,745	\$5,928
Annual food revenue	\$1.11 million	\$1.12 million
Average initiation fee	\$35,300	\$35,290

The following survey results are taken from the Summer 2003 Club Managers' survey. (The complete survey can be found in Appendix A.)

Question 1: What methods are you most likely to use when picking a wine for your list?

Question 1 Responses

Tasting	4.43
Price/value	3.95
Ratings	3.68
Brand name	3.49
Match menu food	3.42
Salesperson recommends	3.11
Member suggestions	3.01
Word of mouth	2.92
Wine committee	2.49

This question was based on a 5-point scale from most likely -5 to least likely-1.

The three most highly ranked responses, live tasting, ratings and price/value relationship are predictable as these are the barometers that club and beverage managers have historically used to select wine. Salesperson recommendations and wine committee suggestions are often questioned as to the motive behind them. It is also interesting to note that word of mouth and member suggestions are not as highly trusted as the top three vote getters. Finally, brand-name recognition

rendered a fourth place rating that suggests national advertising and years of consumer trust and loyalty do make a difference when selecting wines.

Question 2: Who is the primary purchaser of your club's wines?

The general manager or the clubhouse manager buys a club's wine in 72 percent of the cases.

Question 2 Responses

Primary purchaser	Number	Percentage
General manager	52/123	42%
Clubhouse manager	37/123	30%
Assistant manager	15/123	12%
Bar manager	13/123	11%
Other (3 chefs, 2 sommeliers)	5/123	4%
Banquet manager	1/123	.008%

This question addressed the issue of wine purchasing responsibility and the factors used to determine the employees most able to undertake the task. As seen above, the club's general manager and/or the clubhouse manager assumes the responsibility for wine purchasing in 72 percent of the respondent's clubs.

Question 3: Why did your club pick this person to choose and purchase the wines?

Question 3 Responses

	Number	Percentage
Knowledge	38	40%
Experience	28	29%
Job responsibility	17	18%
Industry involvement	5	5%
Accountability	4	4%
Other responses	3	3%

The incumbent's knowledge and experience were the primary considerations in the decision about wine purchasing responsibility in 72 percent of the clubs.

Question 4: Please name the five most popular bottled wines on your list in the last year in order of magnitude of sales.

Question 4 Responses

Ten Most Popular Wines	Number of Citations (Our Survey)	National Rank (Restaurant Top 50 Survey)
Kendall Jackson Chardonnay	39	1
Cakebread Chardonnay	25	2
Sonoma Cutrer Chardonnay	25	3
Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio	14	10
Rombauer Chardonnay	10	41
Ferrari Carano Chardonnay	10	7
Jordan Cabernet	9	4
Duckhorn Merlot	8	17
Stags Leap Cabernet	8	13
Sterling Merlot	8	6

National popularity and national public polls should not be ignored when assembling a club's list. Many of the top 10 wines sold in clubs were also among the top 10 mentioned in the *Wine & Spirits* national poll. Especially note that the top three were consistent in both polls. This question was included on the survey to demonstrate the importance of including wines on a club list that diners know best, the names on everyone's lips. Proven quality and outstanding marketing are the primary reasons that these wines, year after year, are at the top of many polls.

Question 5: Please identify five wines that you bought in the last year that have been the least popular in sales, in terms of bottles sold.

The following wines did not sell well at clubs in 2002-2003:

Question 5 Responses

Types	Number of Citations
Rieslings	34
Very expensive wines	29
Red Zinfandel	26
Red Bordeaux	24
U.S. Rhone Blends	22
Red Italians	21
Red Burgundy	14
Red Rhones	11
Pinot Blanc	10

Beaujolais	8
Viognier	8
Fume Blanc	8
Chianti	7

Although not obvious from the above results, but apparent from vintages and producers named in the surveys, the following trends were also noted when analyzing the data for Question 5:

- Older vintages of white wine did not sell well.
- Wines with obscure, uncommon and unknown producer names were frequently mentioned.
- Wines with uncommon varietal names were frequently mentioned (for example, Viognier, Semillon, Pinot Blanc, Malbec, Carignane, Vignoles, Chenin Blanc, Vouvray, Fume Blanc, Sancerre, Cabernet Franc and White Merlot)

Other observations as a result of the above are that Rieslings and very expensive wines were slow movers in 2003. Red Zinfandels and the most popular and classic European reds (Rhone, Burgundy, Bordeaux and Red Italians) were also among the slowest moving. Conversely, this might suggest that white wines in general and California reds both sold well in clubs in 2003.

Question 6: How do you go about acquiring older bottles for your wine list? Please check all the answers that apply:

Question 6 Responses

Method	Number	Percentage
Wholesaler offer	83	67%
Auction	18	15%
Specialty retailer	18	15%
Winery direct	22	18%
Estate sale	10	8%
Other		

Respondents were asked to specify their sources for acquiring older bottles in order to build a list that has depth in vintages. They depend heavily on their wholesalers for the infrequent special offering, however, almost 70 respondents also sought less traditional methods to broaden their offerings. Note that over half of the respondents (70 out of 123) took the time to seek out rare or hard-to-find bottles in less traditional avenues than wholesalers.

Question 7: Please indicate the approximate number of selections on your club's wine list for each varietal listed below.

Question 7 Responses

Varietal	Number of selections
California Cabernet	19.70
New World Chardonnay	14.73
California Merlot	8.58
Champagne & Sparking Wines	7.87
Dessert Wines, Ports, Sherries	7.26
Red Bordeaux	6.92
California Pinot Noir	5.50
White Burgundy	4.65
Red Burgundy	4.60
New World Sauvignon Blanc	4.10

This question allowed respondents to specify the geographic and varietal makeup of their lists. The results indicate the average number of bottles in each category from 123 responses. This data can be used to predict the make-up of a typical club wine list.

A ninety-five to one hundred bottle club list would be comprised of the following in a best-practice scenario:

<u>Number</u>	<u>Varietal</u>	<u>Average</u>	<u>Most</u>	<u>Fewest</u>
19	Cabernet/Meritage	19	120	4
8	Champagnes	8	19	3
8	Merlot	8	25	1
7	Bordeaux	7	58	1
7	Dessert/Port/Sherry	7	44	0
5	Pinot Noir	5	33	0
5	Burgundy Red	5	50	0
4	Red Italians	4	14	0

4	Sauvignon Blancs	4	25	0
4	White Burgundy	4	51	0
2	Italian Whites	2	5	0
2	Australian Reds	2	14	0
2	Rhone Reds	2	10	0
2	Rieslings	2	12	0
1	White Bordeaux	1	5	0

Other findings include these two results from question 7:

United States wines account for nearly 55 percent of selections on club lists in the survey. Even the most modest club wine list had a minimum of seven chardonnays and four cabernets.

Question 8: How do you assess your member's preferences?

Question 8 Responses

Assessment method	Number	Percentage
Member suggestion	107	38%
Last year's sales	95	34%
Wine Committee suggestion	37	13%
National survey	34	12%
Club survey	9	3%
Other	0	

Last year's sales and member suggestions (71 percent of responses) are the leading barometers for gauging member preferences among respondents. Club managers were less likely to rely on a wine committee or surveys for

input. Perhaps few clubs actually had wine committees. It is important to note that speaking informally with members during or after their dining experience can often be a reliable source of assessment according to our respondents.

Question 9: How do you price a bottle of wine?

Question 9 Responses

Pricing method	Number	Percentage
Cost x 2	65	43%
Sliding -40	50	33%
Cost x3	16	10%
Sliding -60	13	8%
Other	8	5%

Respondents indicated that cost x 2 up to \$40 per bottle then a sliding scale after \$40 per bottle is the dominant pricing method. It is used by 75 percent of clubs. Less than 25 percent of responding managers felt that more aggressive pricing was mandated at their clubs. In relation to public restaurants (3x or 3.5x cost) clubs tend to value-price their wine list offerings.

Question 10: How do you price your by-the-glass house wines?

Question 10 Responses

Pricing method	Number	Percentage
Bottle price divide 4	77	66%
Local market	19	16%
Bottle price divide 5	13	11%
By the ounce	6	5%
Bottle price divide 6	1	1%

Respondents were asked to explain how they priced a glass of wine. Nearly two-thirds of all club managers responding indicated that they divided the retail price of the bottle of wine by four to arrive at a by-the-glass price.

Question 11: How many ounces do you pour for your wines by the glass?

Question 11 Responses

Ounces	Number	Percentage
6	63	52%
7	23	19%
5	17	14%
8	13	10%
4	4	3%
9+	2	1.5%
3	0	0%

Respondents to the survey indicated that by-the-glass wines are generally (66 percent) priced by dividing the bottle's retail price by four and pouring six to seven ounces.

Six to seven ounces account for 70 percent of the responses.

Question 12: Do you have an annual budgeted cost percentage goal for your overall wine program?

Question 12 Responses

Yes: 70

No: 50

Percentage average of 70 responses: 43.36%

The 70 club managers responding positively to this question had an average budgeted wine product cost of 43.36 percent. Fifty respondents did not report having a fixed wine cost to their budgeting process. It is again evident that value pricing is a factor for at least 57 percent of club managers as they work through their budgeting process, since 43 percent is considered by many to be a very high beverage cost in the overall hospitality industry.

Question 13: How do you market your bottle list?

Question 13 Responses

Method	Number	Percentage
Table list	78	33%
Wait staff	75	31%
Management	44	18%

Printed material	28	12%
Sommelier	14	6%
Other		

Respondents could check as many responses as might apply in this question so there are more responses (239) than respondents (123). Clubs are using a variety of methods to market wine in-house. Approximately 64 percent of respondents use wait-staff suggestions and/or leaving a wine list with menus upon a guest's arrival.

At approximately one-third of the clubs (44 out of 123), management takes a hands-on approach to selling wine.

Question 14: Do you currently provide any sort of selling motivator (cash incentive or tip) to your sellers?

Question 14 Responses

	Number	Percentage
Yes	52	42%
No	72	58%

Almost 60 percent of the respondents clubs do not use selling motivators for wine service. Many respondents' comments related to club member concerns that pushy sales techniques had no place in a private club atmosphere.

Question 15: In your opinion, would an incentive for service staff/bartender to sell wine increase bottled wine sales?

Question 15 Responses

	Number	Percentage
Yes	93	75%
No	30	25%

Question 16: In your opinion, would an incentive for service staff/bartender to sell wine increase bottled wine sales?

Question 16 Responses

	Number	Percentage
Yes	100	82%
No	21	18%

An overwhelming majority of club manager respondents felt that selling motivators will work in club environments. However, as seen in question #14, many managers are unwilling to use such motivators for fear of becoming too commercial or aggressive with sales techniques.

Question 17: Please rate the following characteristics that you believe makes your list distinct or more competitive than those of local restaurants.

Question 17 Responses

(5=most likely; 1=least likely)

Characteristic	Average rating
Price value	4.46
Selection	3.80
Prestige	3.40
Expensive	2.97
Storage	2.52

These characteristics make a club wine program distinct from that of a public restaurant. The two highest ranking characteristics according to club managers are price/value and appropriately selected lists.

Question 18: Which of the practices listed below does your club adhere to when storing its wine?

Question 18 Responses

Practice	Number	% of total responses	% of total surveys
Temperature	103	34%	84%
Light-free	80	26%	65%
Humidity	68	22%	55%
Vibration	52	17%	42%

Respondents were asked to indicate all storage conditions that applied to their individual clubs, resulting in 303 total responses from 123 surveys. Managers responded that, in 84 percent of cases, they attempted to store wine in a temperature-controlled environment (65

percent light protected, 55 percent humidity controlled, 42 percent vibration controlled). Nearly half (42 percent) of the responding clubs protect their wines from all four elements and an overwhelming majority (84 percent) protect their wine's temperature.

Question 19: Which of the following factors hinder your club's ability to store wine in a manner which maximizes its quality?

Question 19 Responses

Factor	Number	Percentage
Space	72	50%
Budget	57	39%
Apathy	16	11%

Fifty percent of respondents indicated that a lack of space hindered their program and 39 percent of respondents indicated that a lack of funding prevented proper storage.

Question 20: Do you believe that storage is a vital component of your wine program?

Question 20 Responses

	Number	Percentage
Yes	98	90%
No	11	10%

An overwhelming majority of respondents (90 percent) felt that proper storage of wine was important to their wine program. However, as seen in question 17, space and club budgets often hinder a club's ability to provide proper storage.

Findings and Conclusions

This monograph has explored suggestions from writers, input from nationally circulated surveys, and responses from private club managers about procedures that are most appropriate for wine selection, pricing, storage, and marketing. There was a great deal of consensus regarding best practice techniques.

Given these findings, it is appropriate to suggest a best practice list of principles that readers can use to self-assess the wine management tactics used in their clubs. A suggestion: consider each practice listed; if it is in current use, there is support for its efficacy. If it is not, analysis about its applicability to the club is in order. Depending on a specific club's needs and circumstances the given tactic can be implemented wholesale or perhaps it can be modified to be more appropriate.

Wine Selection

Where to Begin

We've all heard the following popular quips about wine: "So much wine, so little time" and "Life is too short to drink bad wine." There is an abundance of wine on the market, but where should a club manager begin to rebuild a mediocre

wine list? What are the initial building blocks of a well-chosen list? The following are “best practice” suggestions:

- Review the past year’s sales; learn what did and did not sell.
- Assess members’ preferences and suggestions for the wine list.
- Retain an independent, unbiased consultant to ensure that a wholesale distributor’s quota system priorities, pressures, and agenda aren’t unduly or inappropriately influencing the selections on the wine list.
- Assure that your list has an adequate allocation of Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon selections.
- Maintain name brands. Which brands sell the best nationwide are very predictable with most wine-buying constituencies.

Choosing the Proper Bottles

There are several major factors for club managers to consider when selecting specific wines for their memberships:

- Taste-test the wines yourself.
- Pay close attention to a variety of rating sources.

- Special tactics to obtain high quality wines include auctions, winery direct purchasing, and wine futures purchasing.
- Shop for outstanding price/value relationships.
- Solicit input from your wholesale distributor's salesperson.

Note: Many wine periodicals contain recent reviews of wines available in the marketplace. Some of these are Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate*, the *Wine Spectator* magazine, Steven Tanzer's *International Wine Cellar* and the *Wine Enthusiast* magazine. It may also be of interest to club managers that Parker and Tanzer are not influenced by advertising dollars as both of their periodicals rely solely on subscription income (not advertisements) for their publication. These two publications can be of particular importance when selecting specific bottles.

What Wines Should be Avoided?

- Wines with uncommon grape varietal names.
- Wines from producers that lack national name-brand recognition.
- Wines that are commonly found in grocery stores.
- Extremely expensive wines.

Assessing the Club and its Cuisine

Clubs are different. No two clubs have the same members, the same location or the same level of member affluence. There are yacht clubs, beach clubs, golf clubs, country clubs, tennis clubs, athletic clubs and so on across North America. Managers should gauge the wine and culinary expectations of their membership. How can this be done? Best practice tactics include:

- Research local restaurants to determine what is selling within one's local market.
- Remember that the expectations and sophistication level of your membership will help determine the choices and the number of selections offered.
- Recognize that the wine list exists to complement your club's cuisine.
- Focus on wine styles that match multiple dishes, for instance, silky smooth wines that avoid excesses like high alcohol and bitter tannins. Pinot Noirs and Reislings are a good place to start.
- Seek out some non-traditional wines. Select eclectic wines not commonly available to broaden a member's dining experience. This will enable the diner to learn about the incredibly diverse world of wine. Wines with moderate alcohol levels and higher acidity are more food-friendly. The grapes come from places like Alsace, Italy, Spain,

New Zealand, and Burgundy. Today's food-friendly wines use grapes like Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, and Temperanillo.

Another consideration in the selection process relates to who should buy the wine on behalf of the club. Our survey revealed that in 68 percent of the cases either the clubhouse manager or the general manager selected the wines because of their knowledge and experience. Most clubs did not leave this decision to a bar manager or assistant manager. In a worst-case scenario, the wine list may be managed by an overworked assistant manager without the time or inclination to train the staff and to learn about the values available in the market. Alternatively, the list may be managed by a food or beverage server without the power to make buying decisions or to influence his/her peers' behavior.

Note: Thirty percent of the clubs in the survey received input from the club's wine committee. The importance of satisfying member suggestions was identified earlier, and this tactic provides one way to do so.

Pricing Wine

Most private clubs have a food and beverage operation that, at best, breaks even or, in most cases, loses a modest amount of money each year. In the past several years, an increasing number of club boards are accepting the notion

that, just like the swimming pool, the club's food service should be subsidized to some extent. This thinking has affected many club wine programs. The prevailing philosophy in the 21st century seems to be that since clubs are in the happiness business (as opposed to the profit business) then club managers should strive to sell well-chosen wines at lower prices.

Other best practices include:

- A tiered approach to wine list pricing is recommended. A majority of club managers are electing to double the cost of a bottle up to a certain point and then cap their per bottle profit on more expensive offerings at around \$30 to \$40 per bottle.
- The recommended budgeted profit margin for a club's overall program is 55 percent.
- Most respondents chose to make no more profit on a glass of wine than on a bottle. Clubs take the bottle price and divide it by four then pour approximately four glasses per bottle.
- Pricing for allocated, hard-to-find wines should be kept on the higher side. Doing so slows down sales and keeps highly desirable wines on a club list.
- If a club is going to have similar styles of a wine, such as Chardonnay or Cabernet, then the wines should be offered at different price points. Having the same style of wine at the same price point is redundant.

- Seek out discounts for volume purchasing. Buying large volumes of house wine enables a wine purchaser to negotiate a discount and place higher markups on wines such as house pours that tend to move more quickly.

Marketing

Size of the Wine List

Many club members may be intimidated by an extensive wine list that is the size of a big city telephone book. Huge lists may be counterproductive to a club wine list's purpose of selling more wine. Members should have confidence when ordering and a big list can be intimidating.

A well-maintained, small list (approximately 90 to 100 selections) has its advantages. Quickly changeable, a small list allows the wine purchaser to take advantage of the best buys and highly allocated wines. It helps to keep the selections fresh, and allows your chefs to find the ideal matches for new and different menu items. Most members perceive a small wine list to be friendlier and one can make it more so by including helpful descriptions and food recommendations. Wine consumers prefer annotated wine lists over ones that don't provide any guidance. Other best practice results are as follows:

- Smaller, well-chosen lists are a dominant trend, a list can be elegant with only 50 selections.

- Avoid price and style repetition.
- Ninety to 100 selections is appropriate for most respondents' club wine lists.
- Build in the flexibility to retool often as vintages change, new releases appear, bottles are eighty-sixed often, and rare are the wines with year-long availability.

Wine List Design and Appearance

Good wine lists instill buyer confidence by being easy to read and easy to navigate. A wine list should make the reader feel smart and should allow the diner to spend as much money as desired. A good list should offer food friendly wines, tempting values, and several different price points. Other best practice considerations are as follows:

- List wines by country and region.
- Varietal breakdowns and sub-regions can form secondary categories.
- Wine lists should be well-proofed and clearly organized.
- Use a readable font, brief wine descriptions and ensure that the verbiage and adjectives used to describe wines will enable a member to make an easy decision.

Servers and Equipment

Diners are more apt to return to a club with personal touches that include a well-trained serving staff and proper wine equipment such as glassware and accessories. Best practice scenarios regarding servers and equipment in a club wine program include the following suggestions:

- Clubs should adopt a non-aggressive approach to selling. Servers should be able to speak intelligently about wine without being pushy or overbearing.
- Although a large majority of club managers felt that selling motivators would work in marketing wine, more than 60 percent of these same managers felt that these same motivators would create a commercial or pushy environment that club members would consider inappropriate.
- The two most common practices used to market wine in clubs were suggestive selling on the part of a server or manager or simply placing a wine list at each table upon a diner's arrival.
- Proper glassware is encouraged for use in clubs. Austrian crystal manufacturer Reidel is the preferred purveyor. Reidel claims that the precise shapes of their bowl and rim project the wine at the part of your mouth that is most sensitive to a particular attribute of that wine varietal. So

- they make different shapes of glassware for different varietals.
- It is the author's experience that elegant silver-plated wine stands, buckets and red wine table-top caddies can have a positive effect on a club's wine program. While there may be no research available on these aspects of a program, it makes sense to feature good looking, functional accessories to showcase your wines. A stylish decanter should also be available to remove sediment from older wines.

Storage and Inventory Management

Wine is alive and ever-changing. It reacts to many forms of outside stimuli such as temperature, light, and movement. Wine should be stored in an environment that is conducive to its good health and longevity. Accordingly, an overwhelming majority of club manager respondents in the survey said that proper storage was an important element of a club's wine program. Many best practice themes emerged from the research as follows:

- Although there is some disagreement among experts as to the precise correct temperature for wine storage, there is consensus that wine should be stored at 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

- The ideal humidity level for a wine storage facility is 75 percent. Moderate humidity keeps corks in place stopping them from shrinking, but too much humidity will rot bottle labels.
- Excessive vibration is detrimental to wine. Wine can lose bouquet if vibration occurs.
- Darkness is important because light will cause wine to age prematurely.
- Ventilation is also important as lingering strong or stale smells can affect the flavor of wine.
- Store bottles in a horizontal position so the cork will not dry out which can introduce oxidation.
- Open bottles of wine stored overnight should be protected from the introduction of oxygen to the surface of wine in a partial bottle. The two best methods of preventing oxidation of open bottles are blanketing the wine's surface with argon, a colorless, odorless gas or pumping air out of a bottle with the 'Vacu-Vin" system.

The results of the survey indicated that:

- The standing inventory level for a club would be the annual retail sales of bottled wine multiplied by seventy-five percent.
- The annual volume of wine sales will give a club manager the baseline for purchasing the proper quantities for the next year.

- The club manager must also weigh whether to purchase in small lots to keep the list fresh or to purchase in quantity to take advantage of discounting and/or allocated wines.

Note: The downside of acquiring allocated wines is that an establishment is usually asked to take on inventory that may not be wanted or needed. Again, club management must decide between reward and risk in dealing with a wholesaler's allocated stock or quantity discounts.

Closing Remarks

Managers are continually challenged to enhance their club's dining experiences. The wine list allows managers to show members that they are willing to provide a dining experience not available at a local restaurant. The wine list can tell members that belonging to a private club has advantages. It is a special place where members feel good about entertaining friends and family.

A good wine list doesn't just happen. It requires management effort to overcome the challenges of storage, food compatibility, list size, list presentation, and pricing with an eye towards value.

The intention of this monograph is to research three key sources of opinion (industry experts, leading sommeliers, and club managers) and to compare this input with two independent surveys.

On a personal note, wine has been a passion of this author for more than twenty years. Wine has its niche in all private clubs and, for one club manager at least, has been more a labor of love than simply a labor. If you, as a club manager, develop a passion for your club's wine program and put forth some energy, your club's membership will be rewarded for your efforts. Information to help you do so was the intent of this monograph.

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