Planning A Wine Dinner

Hosting wine dinners at your club can be done for the enjoyment of your members or to enhance the reputation of the club. Wine based events have the ability to be amongst the most enjoyable events for members and their guests to attend and the staff to host.

These writings cannot nearly capture the breadth or depth of detail in hosting a wine dinner, but they discuss many of the considerations in doing so.

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

Develop the purpose of the event. Is it to convey knowledge? Will you contrast or compare disparate wines or vintages? Do you wish to market a new niche on the wine list? Are you trying to have your members associate the club with fine wines and food? Once you conceive the purpose of the tasting many factors will to fall into place.

The most creative events may also be the most popular. Seed ideas for wine events are listed below.

- Winemaker - invite a winemaker to compare and contrast his wines. Look for other wines associated with the winemaker at different properties either as a consultant or winemaker i.e. Tony Soter of Etude, Moraga and Spottswoode.
- Regional - focus on the wine of a particular region i.e. the Southern Rhone's Chateauneuf-du-Pape blanc made from marsanne and roussanne, Chateauneuf-du-Pape rouge made from blends featuring grenache, syrah, and mourvedre, Condrieu made from viognier, and Gigondas made primarily from grenache. Emphasizing the regional cuisine is a consideration for menu planning.
- Varietal - choose a single varietal and focus on its characteristics in different regions or in different vintages such as syrah from Australia (Penfold's Grange Hermitage), California (Qupé Syrah Bien Nacido Reserve) and France (Jaboulet's Hermitage La Chapelle)
- Vintage - also known as vertical tasting, contrast same or similar wines in separate vintages i.e. pouring the past eight vintages 1989 through 1996 of Chalone Pinot Noir Reserve
- Comparative - the most famous example was held in Paris in 1974 where American wines were a surprising victor over their French counterparts. Compare a Carneros chardonnay to a Cote du Beaune offering. Vote and tally the favored wine at each course to determine the victor.
- Food - choose one food that is complimented by different wines. Oysters for example may be served accompanied by Chablis, Champagne, Muscadet and Sauvignon Blanc.
- BYO - serve a dinner complete with wine excepting one course that is made known. Allow members to bring a specific wine geared to the course from their own cellar. Note: review the local code for your alcoholic beverage license before embarking.
• Barrel samples - obtain the pre-release samples of wine to taste with food. A large appeal for this event is exclusivity because wines are not yet released. The wines may not be ready for consumption particularly those with high tannins and would require substantial hors d'oeuvre.

• Vineyard - choose a vineyard with different wines or producers. Bien Nacido Vineyard is the source for chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah for winemakers such as Au Bon Climat, Hitching Post, Qupé, Jaffurs Cellars, and Zaca Mesa.

• Blind Tastings - Generally these tastings should group wines within a very specified range unless the tasters are very well seasoned and short on egos.

• The club within the club. Create a club wine society of your members and give them "exclusive" invitations to these wine events.

Wine events need not be formal. Many of the proposed formats would work for a lunch dinner or reception. Look to utilize different venues or themes as well. For example, a champagne tasting could be featured around your putting green set up for croquet. Have members wear their croquet whites and host a fun setting that is not completely focused on wine.

INTRODUCTION OF THE WINE EXPERT

Wine experts come in many shapes and sizes. The best part about this business is the fraternity of the vine so to speak. The world of wine tends to be very friendly. As one would have expected from Bacchus, the Greek God of wine and revelry, wine experts are eager to participate in events that promote wine. Many names are available for events provided you plan far enough in advance (6 months to a year) and don't mind paying expenses commensurate to the speaker.

Internationally acclaimed writers such as Clive Coates, James Laube or Robert Parker would certainly add luster to any event. To have one of these luminaries attend a wine function as a speaker is perhaps not as difficult as it would seem. Wine speakers or writers love to participate in a tasting of significance. A significant tasting would tend to have older vintages of established wineries or be of sufficient breadth to accommodate many. Moreover, these individuals tend to be somewhat glib and can wax nostalgic about almost any subject matter pertaining to wines, vines or phylloxera. Contact may be made with these individuals by contacting the various publications carrying their columns. Typical fees range from $1000 to $3000 plus expenses for transportation and lodging.

Vintners, owners and marketing representatives can be fine additions to talk about their own wines or those wines made in their region. Very few winemakers or owners are myopic. Most will be able to distinguish what makes their wine style versus the style of other vineyards. A note of caution is in order. Many of these men are farmers first and as such, they have not polished their presentation skills. Planning a structured program for these individuals may be wise. A few winemakers consider these visits to be interruptions to their singular focus and only leave the vineyards to appease their a) owner or b) national sales and marketing director. Generally, they are fairly jovial and,
once the wine is poured, they tend to be in their element. The cost of hosting a wine professional tends to be less expensive especially when the distributor sponsors their visit.

Your local or national distributors are the keys to landing these wine professionals. National distributors such as Brown Foreman, Kobrand or Frederick Wildeman and Sons have a large base of winemakers and properties to draw from. Contact your local distributor and solicit a list of visiting winemakers scheduled to appear in the coming months. Once or twice a year, winemakers will venture forth to help promote their products. Take advantage of this with your distributor. The distributor representatives are particularly sensitive to showing these dignitaries off to the prestigious accounts that clubs are inclusive in.

The club may choose to draw upon a local expert from a distributor or even a member. This individual is likely to be well versed in the wines of their portfolio or cellar. Oftentimes their interest is carried further into receiving a designation of Master of Wine (MW) or master Sommelier (MS). Achieving either designation shows very detailed knowledge of not only wine but also winemaking practices. Should you develop a relationship, this individual could also be used for other events outside their portfolio.

MATCHING OF FOOD AND WINES

Many articles and books are written on pairing wine and food. The most important factors in creating the best partners are flavors and the weight of the wine, the flavors and texture of the food and its accompanying sauce. Tasting the wines is an invaluable asset to the chef in terms of matching weights, textures and flavors. The chef should be able to finely tune the course to the wine. Your chef may also review wine-tasting notes from various publications or even over the internet. These tasting notes serve as a guide to the primary keys in creating a match.

Note that there is a delicate balance between food and wine. One should not overpower the wine with too many combinations of flavors on the plate. In trying to serve many masters, you would serve none. Concentrate on the primary characteristics in the wine and food. The pairing should also favor or emphasize the wine. Attached with this article is a guide to food and wine pairings covering classical food and wine matches as well as some more contemporary accompaniments. Some general keys to wine and food matching are written below and are based on taste components of sweet, salt, sour and bitter.

- "Official" rules do not exist. Many people will drink what is good without formalizing the process.
- Young white wines tend to have higher acidity. Acidity allows these white wines to cut through richness or fat while complimenting flavors in lighter dishes.
- Young red wines have higher levels of tannins as a result of their skins, seeds and stems incorporated in the winemaking. Tannins, a preservative, add firmness and weight to wine and direct its use to heavier food groups.
• As lighter wines are typically served before fuller bodied wines, later courses should correspondingly increase in weight. The density of the food is the primary consideration in matching to red or white wines. Food flavors then allow the closure to a final match.

• The differences between wines in a single varietal may be immense and should be cause consideration between individual winemakers or vineyards. Take chardonnay for example, the wine made from growers in Chablis is a light style with stone, flint and crisp apple flavors. Burgundian vineyards yield wines of immense richness built on layers of pear, honeycomb and almonds. A California chardonnay may have the rich vanilla and toast nose followed by exotic pineapple, mango or apricot. We are not even touching on the ways individuals treat their wines after harvest.

• Drier wines served before sweet wines have greater ranges to support food matches. Off dry wines such as those made from riesling or chenin blanc support food matches because of the sweetness or saltiness inherent in many foods. Alternately, a sweet wine can cause difficulty with matches because their sugar content tends to mask lighter and more delicate flavors.

• The sauce plays a role in choosing the wine. Follow the stock base as a guide such that use of a beef base equates to a red wine and matches especially with a single varietal wine as an ingredient of the base.

• Wines paired with food from their respective regions are generally ideal.

• Dessert wines go well with cheese, apples or nuts but less well with sweet desserts unless plain or cake-like.

• Great wines will be impressive regardless of the food prepared.

• Note that as with many "rules", exceptions can be made and, in many cases, merit becoming "rules" themselves. The myth of fish requiring white wine is one such "truth". Red fish like tuna or salmon are appropriately served with some lighter red wines. Seared, peppered ahi tuna calls for a red wine such as pinot noir.

PROCURING WINES AND THE CLUB CELLAR

A question that may vex all club professionals is procuring the wines for the event. Wines are generally available, but not especially on short notice and particularly not when you wish to pour a highly rated wine from a heralded producer. You must work closely in planning out the dinner format with your local source for the wines. Target wines you would like to serve and obtain release dates for them. Reserve the wines with the distributor. The club should be able to have some of the wines held until the event without paying the carrying cost.

Should you have successful wine dinners now, you will likely have successful dinners in the future. Plan for them by utilizing a cellaring strategy in addition to the current market offerings.

A cellaring strategy is helpful for the following reasons:
1. To assure yourself of a premier wine.
2. To assure the necessary quantity is on hand.
3. To get the wine at an agreeable price.
4. To avoid inflated re-release or library pricing.
5. To develop a vertical collection of a particular wine for purposes of contrasting vintages at your event.
6. To ensure the wine has been properly stored and maintained.
7. To build a relationship with the vintner or distributor who will supply the wines and the key speaker.

A benefit of cellaring wine is that age worthy wine undergoes a remarkable transformation between the ages of six and eight. At that point in time, no retailer is carrying the vintage in the market. Few winemakers are releasing the wine from a cellar or library program and restaurants, in their typically shortsighted manner, have long since depleted their allocation. A premier wine's auction price may be greater than two to three times its release price (1990 Bordeaux, for example). The club may now be associated with the finest restaurants in your area because you have not fallen prey to the controller advocating inventory turnover nor the urge to cater to the American "drink 'em if you've got 'em" palate. The club has joined into the myths and legends associated with oenophile sensibilities, serving vintage wine.

PRICING

Each club has a unique pricing structure for our member events. Whether you wish to make a pricing decision based on profit or on marketing strategy, be fair to the member. The reputation you will achieve for the club, cellar, service and culinary staff is a prime consideration for keeping the event's pricing competitive, not punitive.

Plan specific measures for the wine to be poured with each course. Depending on how numerous your wine selections are, adjust the measures of your pours to adhere to an appropriate level. Plan to keep the consumption per individual to no more than 3/4 of a bottle during the evening. As the better and therefore more costly wines tend to be served near the end of the dinner, your guests should be able to make a qualitative difference in the wines served.

Bottle costs maybe divided directly by the number of portions per bottle for budgetary purposes. For example, a four-ounce serving of wine would mean six portions of wine per 750ml bottle. If the bottle cost or sales price is $25, the cost per portion would be $4.17 ($25/6 portions) to be figured into the event price. Repeat the portioning with every wine to be served and add them up to account in the budget.

A word on the role of the cellar in pricing. Nothing makes you feel worse than when the distributor comes to your door in advance of the event to sell you the marquee 1986 vintage your for a usurious markup. Nothing makes you feel better than by telling him that particular wine is resting comfortably in your cellar at one fifth of his cost. Your members will be amazed that you carry the wine and that the cost of the dinner is not stratospherically expensive. Now of course you can account for the time value of money in developing your menu price. You may even wish to add a markup to the dinner price to account for a (gasp) profit motive. You will however still charge your members less
for that bottle of wine than they will be able to find on the open market, especially in the restaurants. For that, your members will be eternally grateful.

You may elect to serve an aperitif prior to a dinner event. For budgetary purposes, plan on one serving per person for every 1/2 hour of cocktails. Lighter wines or sparkling wines serve this purpose admirably for not a lot of cost. Another thought is to serve a light local beverage in the spirit of the evening. Serve Compari with a dinner based on Italian wines. Kir made from an aligoté wine and a dash of cassis would do well to preface a focus on Burgundian wines.

The service staff should have an accurate measure to follow as a pouring guide. Set up a sample glass with the appropriate amount of water portioned into the glass. Servers would then have a guide against over pouring an expensive wine. Remind them of the appropriate level every time they pour the wine.

Plan to cover at least a cost plus labor for the food. Another way to phrase the issue is not to under fund the menu. Notwithstanding the fact that great wines will be impressive no matter the accompaniment, make sure to give the culinary staff a platform to present a complete package and the service staff the consideration to present the food and wine properly and promptly. In these events, let the chef be the star. Include him in discussions on matching, particularly if he was involved in tasting of the wines prior to designing the menu. Introduce the chef at the program's end to ensure he and his key staff receive recognition and to aid the marketing of the club's star chef. The service staff should also be saluted for their contributions.

GLASSWARE

Many companies make a fortune on producing specific glassware for wine varietals. Riedel is a producer who has defined this product and is now copied by many glassware producers. However, most tastings simply require an all-purpose glass for all wines concerned. A major consideration for the glassware is for a closed mouth. The sole reason is the allowance of the glass to focus the wine's bouquet into the taster's olfactory sense. The olfactory sense is the major tasting component (Case in point: the last time you drank wine with a stuffy nose).

Glassware should be clean and free of spots for visual evaluation. Plan on one glass per wine and place all of the glassware on the table prior to seating. For service and timing considerations, do not attempt to place glassware on the table during the tasting. Glassware may be rented from companies if extra stock is required.

Should you have appropriate stock, place glassware befitting the portion size of the wine being poured. A two-ounce portion of wine in a twenty four-ounce balloon glass appears meager. In particular, an ounce and a half portion of dessert wine or port in a glass larger than 8 ounces suffers the same fate.
Some tastings, especially blind tastings, require marking the glasses for participants to compare. Use of a numbering system may be accomplished with tags or a dry erase marker that will be applied directly to the stem of the glassware. Formal tastings within specific groups need differentiation. As you plan to pour more wines, the need for a marking system increases.

**DECORATIONS AND APPOINTMENTS**

Decorations should be kept rather simply for the event. Fragrant flowers compete with the wine for your sense of smell. If you are making the matching of food and wine the premier activity, remove salt and pepper from the table. You may wish to make water served upon request only. Don't offer pepper with courses, the idea being that the chef has made a course to match perfectly with the wine.

A menu and tasting notes should be provided for the participants of the tasting. The menu serves as a guide to the wines and in a practical sense illuminates the proper spelling and pronunciation for the wines offered. The ability to identify and pronounce the wine at a later date might be a key in having your membership order the wine from your list.

A tasting sheet and writing instrument could be provided from the club to allow evaluation of the wines presented. Evaluation occurs on four sensory characteristics: sight, smell, taste and mouth feel. A twenty-point scale is a generally accepted standard in the wine industry. Five points are awarded for each of the four characteristics. Tally the scores from each characteristic and compare them to the other wines. Space for written notes should complete each section. Refer to the sample tasting sheet attached.

**ADVERTISING AND MARKETING**

As with any club event, advertise six to eight weeks ahead of time. Some marketing may be accomplished in hand selling by the service staff. Allow them to pour a sample of a featured wine and to members in the dining areas and bars. Inform those pouring of the information of the event and the wines to be served. Some wineries will encourage the club to pour their wines in a by the glass program prior to and following the event. A single taste before could be worth a table of eight at the event.

**STORAGE OF WINE**

Wine has its own particular set of circumstances prior to being served. Wine must be handled with as much consideration prior to service as when being poured. The storage of wine is keyed upon four criteria: proper and constant temperature at or below 60°F, proper and constant humidity at approximately 70%, absence of light and absence of movement or vibration. The longer the wine is stored, the more important adherence is to the above criteria.
Constant temperature and humidity is favored over fluctuation and is more of a concern than ideal cellar temperature below 60°F. Small and gradual changes of no more than 5°F of fluctuation over the course of a year will not significantly affect the wine's evolution. Should the bottles be properly stored, the wine should be able to develop further complexities.

**DECANTING**

Older wines and younger wines may sometimes be requested to be decanted. Decanting is a method of altering the taste of a wine by the introduction of oxygen or the texture of an old wine by the removal of lees. As with any compound, wines are altered by the introduction of oxygen. With younger wines, oxygen speeds up the wine's softening. Tannic red wines are often decanted to soften the coarse taste of tannins and to let their aromas develop. Tannic wines may be decanted and left to sit in a vessel which permits greater surface exposure to oxygen.

Red wines may develop lees from ages eight to twelve years. Lees are a naturally occurring material from grape solids and tartrates suspended in the wine. Traditionally, lees have been associated with the longest lived and heaviest styled red wines. The bottle styles of Bordeaux, for example, have an extreme sloped shoulder as opposed to the gently sloping shoulder of a Burgundian bottle. Their shoulder is meant to act as a basin to catch this sediment prior to exiting into a glass. The punt or the indentation of the bottle also aids the prevention of sediment movement to the neck of the bottle.

Wine may be traditionally decanted or industrially decanted. Bottles to be traditionally decanted are stored upright a day in advance and carried as gently as possible in that position to the service area. The bottle is left upright and the capsule is entirely removed. The choice of the corkscrew must involve a worm that is sufficient in length to completely pierce and remove the whole cork. The danger of leaving a crumbling cork in the neck is great in older bottles and will slow your efforts considerably. Pull the cork out and clean the top of the bottle with a damp cloth. Light a candle and raise the bottle position so that the bottle's neck is between your eyes and the flame of the candle. For obvious reasons, do not place the bottle directly over the candle flame. Slowly and steadily pour the wine into the decanting vessel. As the bottle empties you will clearly be able to detect sediment progressing up through the bottle towards the neck. The fine sediment typically moves first and will look like tendrils or fingers. Fine sediment is virtually undetectable and may be poured into the decanting vessel. As larger particles move into view, cease pouring. When done correctly, less than one and one half ounces of wine will be left in the bottle. The bottle may be rinsed and displayed with the decanting vessel on the table or you may elect to pour the wine back into the rinsed bottle for service at the table.

To quickly decant wines, one must remove the capsule and cork as above. Then, pour the complete bottle of wine through a cheese cloth lined funnel into an empty vessel. Rinse the bottle and present to the table. Purists would say this process detracts from the
quality of the wine, but I think those who argue for the formal process may not consider the time involved in decanting multiple bottles or the issue of circumstantial expediency.

TEMPERATURES AND TIMING

The service temperatures of wine will vary between the varietal being poured and the tastes of the person enjoying the wine. General guidelines are red wines served at 60 F-65 F or near "cellar temperature." White wines should be served from 45F - 55F or slightly chilled. The colder the temperature of the wine, the less flavor and aroma one will receive from the wine. Thus, in pouring wine at a tasting, one should try not to serve the wines too chilled so as to mask flavors and subtleties.

Service of wine should occur as proximate to its food match as possible. Issues such as staffing, temperature and speed of service will determine whether you will pour the wine just before, with or immediately subsequent to the course. Wineglasses should be removed when empty otherwise they should remain on the table top throughout. It is common to allow wines to evolve in the glass or to compare them to other wines served later.

CONCLUSION

The world of wine is vast and provides limitless possibilities for creative and popular events. Wine is an integral part of your members' lifestyle and should be an essential ingredient to augment fine food and beverage programs already in your club. The ability of a club to host proper wine and food events is a true measure of the gastronomical prowess in the food and beverage operation. To be successful in these endeavors is to become a harbinger of the club's membership that your food and beverage programs operate at a truly high level of achievement. Your club's reputation can only be enhanced.
## Food and Wine Matches

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wine</th>
<th>Classic Match</th>
<th>Contemporary Match</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>White Wines</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trebbiano (Soave)</td>
<td>Antipasto</td>
<td>Crab and white truffle risotto</td>
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<td>Melon (Muscadet)</td>
<td>Oysters on half shell</td>
<td>Chevre and spring vegetable strudel</td>
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<td>Viognier</td>
<td>Pike quenelles - sauce nantua</td>
<td>Spicy orange beef on buckwheat noodles</td>
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<td>Gewurztraminer</td>
<td>Charcroute l'ancienne</td>
<td>Muscovy duck terrine - pumpkin chutney</td>
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<td>Marsanne/Roussanne</td>
<td>Poulet aux morels</td>
<td>Smoked salmon - caramelized onion pizza</td>
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<td>Pinot Gris (Grigio)</td>
<td>Onion tart</td>
<td>Sea scallop egg roll and coriander cream</td>
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<td>Riesling</td>
<td>Trout au bleu</td>
<td>White asparagus</td>
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<td>Sauvignon Blanc</td>
<td>Dover sole beurre blanc</td>
<td>Haddock chop on artichoke-lemongrass stew</td>
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<td>Chenin Blanc (Vouvray)</td>
<td>Supremes de volaille bechamel</td>
<td>Mushroom salpicon stuffed poblano chile</td>
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<td>Chardonnay</td>
<td>Escargot</td>
<td>Hazelnut crusted rabbit loin - madeira glace</td>
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<td>Semillon (Sauternes)</td>
<td>Fois Gras</td>
<td>Grilled pineapple with coconut ice cream</td>
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<td><strong>Rose Wines</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anjou</td>
<td>Pork loin roasted with fennel</td>
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<td>Bandol</td>
<td>Leg of lamb tapenade</td>
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<td>Tavel</td>
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<td><strong>Red Wines</strong></td>
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<td>Gamay (Beaujolais)</td>
<td>Coq au vin</td>
<td>Braised endive - pancetta-gorgonzola sauce</td>
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<td>Grenache Blends (Rhone)</td>
<td>Leg of lamb with garlic and herbs</td>
<td>Cepes and black truffle risotto</td>
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<td>Sangiovese (Chianti)</td>
<td>Osso buco</td>
<td>Grilled bistecca marinated balsamic vinegar</td>
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<td>Pinot Noir</td>
<td>Roasted pheasant</td>
<td>Seared ahi tuna with sour cherry jus</td>
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<td>Cabernet Franc</td>
<td>White bean cassoulet</td>
<td>Cedar plank roasted salmon</td>
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<td>Tempranillo (Rioja)</td>
<td>Roasted venison Andaluz</td>
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<td>Merlot</td>
<td>Chateaubriand</td>
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<td>Zinfandel</td>
<td>Crisp duckling bitter orange sauce</td>
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<td>Syrah</td>
<td>Venison with currant demi-glace</td>
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<td>Nebbiolo (Barolo)</td>
<td>Veal Chop studdet with truffle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cabernet Sauvignon</td>
<td>Tournedoes rossini</td>
<td>Rack of lamb mission fig crust</td>
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<td><strong>Sparkling Wines</strong></td>
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<td>Brut or Extra Dry</td>
<td>Caviar canapés</td>
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<td>Demi-Sec, Sec or Doux</td>
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