



The dining room at Daniel, a world renowned, three Michelin star restaurant in New York

Wine Dinners at **Daniel**

Wine dinners are a popular way for restaurants to revitalize their customer base, writes **Marisa D'Vari** as she describes Head Sommelier Rajeev Vaidya's classy wine dinners

Wine-pairing dinners help bring together a community of wine-lovers and give us the chance to open and share wines we have in the cellar that are often overlooked or too expensive for most to enjoy," says Rajeev Vaidya. Bombay-raised, New Jersey-born Vaidya is Head Sommelier at Daniel, the world-renowned restaurant which is a Relais & Châteaux member with highly-coveted Michelin three stars and four stars from *The New York Times*.

Vaidya, who discovered the magic of wine while working in a series of restaurant positions, has been with Daniel for the past year and a half. He first acquired an understanding of wine through blind-tastings and self-study and then joined the Wine & Spirits Education Trust (WSET) programme, earning his Diploma in 2009.

Sommeliers at fine dining restaurants around the world are looking for ways to revitalize their existing customer base, provide business to the private room during the slower months, and shine a spotlight on wines that have reached their peak of development and are ready to drink. Wine pairings offer the perfect opportunity to achieve all three objectives.

At the same time, patrons enjoy the ease of dinners where the menu and wines are all pre-selected. Ordering and other decision-making distractions are eliminated, leaving the dinner host entirely free to socialize with his guests. When entertaining clients, patrons especially appreciate knowing the all-inclusive cost in advance.

"Our guests tell me they enjoy meeting new people and being introduced to new wines," says Vaidya, whose friendly

demeanour immediately puts his guests at ease. “Many of them like being educated about wine, and enjoy having their preconceptions about certain wines and appellations changed. Through our events, we can also expose wine lovers to rare vintages, to lesser-known wines, and above all, to renowned wine personalities they wouldn’t otherwise have met. Daniel Boulud and Executive Chef Jean-Francois Bruel both love wine and really support the programme,” says Vaidya.

So with wine dinners receiving nods of approval all around, how should a sommelier go about creating one? For Vaidya, it begins with selecting a theme. Sometimes the theme emerges after a visit to the cellar; at other times it arises from the desire to offer his guests a lesson in appreciation. “Some appellations or bottles are often overlooked, and I see it as my role as a sommelier to shed light on them or at least give them some attention.”

Once Vaidya chooses the wine, he talks to the chefs about pairing ideas. “They usually come up with some ideas on the spot,” he says. I direct them where they are off base, and then we fine tune it a bit. The chefs prepare the dishes and we taste the wines and food together, and adjust the seasoning as required. The chefs here are incredibly talented and easy to work with.”

The exercise serves to bring the chefs and sommelier together in a very productive and creative way. Typically, the dinner opens with a reception where guests are greeted with Champagne or an aperitif from the region to be showcased, and are served a succession of hors d’oeuvres. Last fall, the theme was wine from the Loire Valley. Why this region?

“I chose the Loire for two reasons, apart from my love for the region in general,” says Vaidya. “First, the wide array of options (red, white, rosé, sparkling, plus sweet wines) makes for an interesting dinner while showcasing the region’s diversity. Secondly, I chose the Loire because I had some older bottles of Chinon in the cellar so I could show guests how the wines age.”

During the reception for the Loire dinner, the more adventurous guests mingled with one another. It soon became clear that several wine aficionados had come alone, while others, celebrating birthdays or anniversaries, had brought their entire family.

When the guests were invited to sit down for dinner, Vaidya was present to introduce the wines, mention the

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Head Sommelier Raj Vaidya carefully decants a bottle of wine

producer, recount some interesting anecdotes, and provide tasting notes that explained why the wine was paired with that particular dish. Vaidya frequently pairs each dish with two different wines. Sometimes he will pour two different producers of the same appellation, or two different vintages.

“The idea is either to focus on the regional typicity, the vintage typicity, the producer or the grape variety,” he says. “It helps give guests a better understanding of the grapes and styles of the region.”

On the Loire menu, the first dish of the evening was Trio of Spanish Mackerel, which was basically the fish served three very different ways – warm with cumin and carrot mousseline, tartare with North Star caviar, and poached with white wine geleé. The presentation was accompanied with two wines from Sancerre, a Sauvignon Blanc and a Rosé from Pinot Noir, the Domaine Lucien Crochet Sancerre “Le Chene” 2007, and the Domaine Carrou Sancerre Rosé 2009.

“This was an opportunity to remember that Sancerre is



Vaidya carefully selects the wine for his wine dinners which are planned around a theme

not only a white wine appellation, and highlight the typical mineral notes of Sancerre present in both wines,” says Vaidya, “although the grape variety is different.”

The next course, Hazelnut and Chorizo crusted Maine Sea Scallops with stewed gnocchi, corn fricassée, and nasturtium salad, was served with Domaine Gaston Huet Vouvray “Clos du Bourg” Sec 2008, and Domaine FL Savennieres “La Roche aux Moines” 2007.

“With these wines I gave guests a chance to see the two faces of Chenin Blanc,” notes Vaidya. “One rich, brooding and dense and the other light and floral.”

The main course, a Duo of Pennsylvania Squab – roasted breast with arugula subric, and celery marcona almond crusted leg with Bing cherry juice, was accompanied by two vintages of Domaine Olga Raffault Chinon “Les Picasses”, the 1989 and the 1990. Vaidya describes them as ‘great examples of mature Cabernet Franc with intense gamey aromas and flavours, and very smoky and herb tinged palates’.

A magnum of Clos Rougeard Samur Champigny “Les Poyeux” 2005 accompanied the selection of artisanal cheeses (Tomme du Berger, ‘Hooligan’ and Mimolette, 18 months). Verbena poached doughnut peaches with a



financier biscuit and Hugel Riesling sorbet was served for dessert, accompanied by Domaine de la Bergerie Coteaux du Layon “Cuvee Fragrance” 1997. And the reason for the pairing? Vaidya smiles. “Peaches and botrytised Chenin Blanc are a match made in heaven!”

The dinner was a smashing success, thanks to Vaidya’s energy and tremendous efforts. Yet the creation of the theme and menu is only the beginning, he says. The most challenging thing about orchestrating the dinners is filling the room.

“Just imagine throwing a party and having no one come!” He gets the word out via emails, by posting a description of the event on the web, and perhaps most importantly, talking the dinner up at the tables in the dining room.

The wine and food pairing dinners attract many of Restaurant Daniel’s regular wine enthusiasts, a few wine collectors and trade people, and new guests. In terms of his own satisfaction, “I love having wine-loving guests to chat with about wine at the table,” says Vaidya. “It’s a part of my job that is truly pleasurable. Also, it’s a chance to open wines like magnums of Clos de Tart and old Chinon in a context where the focus is on the wine without prejudice. It gives the guests a chance to approach unusual wines with an open mind.”

Rajeev Vaidya is one of Manhattan’s more popular sommeliers, because of his storied restaurant, priceless cellar, and also his considerable charm and enthusiastic manner. His passion for guest education – and guest pleasure – is palpable, and now that he has the coveted WSET diploma, could a pursuit of the Master of Wine qualification be far behind? ❖