

JULY/AUGUST 2010

FOOD ARTS

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VARIETAL VARIATION

WINE REPORT AS A PROMINENT STEAKHOUSE IS REINVENTED WITH GENTLER PRICES AND A MORE VARIED MENU, A SEASONED SOMMELIER TAKES ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WINE LIST. MARISA D'VARI REPORTS.

What challenges await a restaurant wine director when the owner “de-steaks” a posh steakhouse and turns it into a shrine for New American cuisine? In 2006, **Tom Colicchio** was flying high with his high-priced Manhattan-based **Craftsteak**, up-selling expensive Bordeaux and cult California red wine to a free-spending crowd. A stunning two-story steel and glass vault containing 2,000 bottles reinforced the restaurant’s wine-centric theme. Yet by January 2010, the weakening economy saw Colicchio transforming the space into the lower priced, more accessible “New American cuisine” themed **Colicchio & Sons**.

“When I joined as wine director this past March,” says **Matthew MacCartney**, who had served as beverage director for Colicchio’s **Craft** and **Craftbar** from 2001 to 2003, “the cellar was still geared toward big powerful expensive wines meant to pair with steak, such as Château Latour 1990 and Shafer Hillside Select 1998. There was an immediate need for more white wines and softer, more diverse reds that would pair better with dishes on the new menu.”

To make room for the new wines he would need (the revised list currently counts 250 reds and 100 whites), MacCartney was able to sell off some of the higher priced cult wines and reduce prices on others so they would sell out. Some wines, such as Quilceda Creek Cabernet Sauvignon, remain from the original list and are working well with the new menu. “I think that Quilceda pairs really well with our veal breast with tripe, broccoli spigarello, and trompette royale mushrooms because it has great structure and enough acidity to cut through rich, rustic meats like veal breast and tripe.”

MacCartney, a diplomate of London’s Wine & Spirit Education Trust, went through the menu and thought about the flavors, textures, and styles of the wines he would need to complement the various dishes. Working in his favor was his culinary education, including kitchen experience at New York City’s **Daniel** and at **Cibrè** in Florence, Italy, and dining room manager at **Gramercy Tavern** (New York City).

The chief concern was creating a balance of wine styles, regions,



Matthew MacCartney’s extensive, exotic, and cost-conscious wine collection complements the New American Colicchio & Sons menu.

and price points. The challenge was more difficult because Colicchio & Sons is two restaurants in one—an informal, lower priced tavern style Tap Room that serves à la carte brunch, lunch, and dinner, as well as the formal Dining Room that features a slightly more expensive à la carte dinner menu in addition to a popular \$135 eight course tasting menu.

Ultimately, MacCartney based the style and structure of the list on the one he first wrote for **Craft**. Beyond the cocktails and wines-by-the-glass pages is a category called “Aromatic,” meant to encompass varietals other than Riesling, Grüner Veltliner, Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, and the whites from the Rhône. Here there’s a global treasure chest of unusual gems, including moderately priced Greek Assyrtiko, Spanish Txakolina, and pricey unusual wines like Romorantin from the Loire Valley, an ancient grape from ungrafted vines that sells for \$180 a bottle.

“Eclectic & Indigenous Reds” contains three reds from Austria and an old vine Carignan from the Languedoc. Popular major grape varieties such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Pinot Noir are divided into “Old World” and “New World” categories, as MacCartney feels the dramatic difference in styles between the worlds affects their appropriate food pairings. “For example,” he elaborates,

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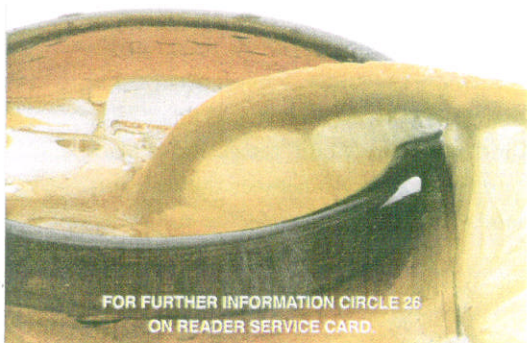

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Colicchio & Sons' Tap Room offers affordable wine pairing options in a relaxed setting with an à la carte menu.

“a New World Chardonnay such Arcadian Sleepy Hollow would overpower butter poached oysters with celery root and caviar, as it’s a rich fruit-forward wine that would contrast with the brininess of the oysters. For this dish, you want a slightly leaner wine that will cut through the butter and will complement the briny oysters and caviar. Yet the Arcadian Sleepy Hollow would work well with pancetta wrapped monkfish with fava beans and truffle vinaigrette.”

MacCartney’s well-crafted international list is a testament to the restaurant’s overall commitment to a successful food and wine pairing program. Thirty percent of the guests in the Dining Room choose the tasting menu, with 35 percent of them choosing the \$65 wine pairing as well. Affordable pairing options are available to Tap Room guests by virtue of MacCartney’s well-trained wine-savvy servers. “Guests can order a \$20 entrée of braised rabbit legs with lentils and soffritto and we would suggest pairing it with a \$58 bottle of 2006 Villa Le Prata Rosso di Montalcino from Tuscany. This is one of my favorite food and wine pairings because the dish demands a hearty wine—something rustic and not too complex. The Rosso di Montalcino has enough depth and structure to stand up to the dish and, at the same time, it doesn’t take center stage as would a grandiose Brunello. We can offer appropriate by-the-glass selections as well.”

Every restaurant has growing pains, and some initial complaints from bloggers and critics focused on the wine list’s high prices. While it’s true many wines are priced under \$100, tariffs *do* rise incrementally from there. MacCartney feels his prices are fair, explaining that he often buys in volume in order to pass the discount to his customers. “I saved 35 percent on the Italian 2002 Pinot Nero Vigna Sant Urbano by buying five cases versus one,” says MacCartney. “In this way, I could offer it to my customers for \$95 instead of \$125. It’s a bargain at that price, and I can turn my customers onto something new without asking them to spend \$125 on a wine they have never heard of.”

Roughly 20 wines are available by the glass, ranging from a Vini Menhir Negroamaro Rosé 2007 (\$8) from Salento, Italy, and Hoopla Vineyards Napa Valley Chardonnay 2007 (\$13) to a Gruet Blanc de Noirs NV sparkler from New Mexico (\$24) and a Vieilles Vignes La Font de l’Olivier Carignan from the Languedoc 2005 (\$13). Many are made from obscure grapes or coming from unknown regions. Does this mean that much of the list has to be hand sold? “Many wines have been chosen to excite curiosity, and servers as well as myself are always able to answer questions,” says MacCartney. Staff training on the wines takes place during family meal, when servers taste a given wine and talk about it, especially its region, winemaking techniques, comparable varieties, and pairing ideas.

From Cabernet Sauvignon to Bordeaux, Assyrtiko to Zweigelt, MacCartney’s list represents a tantalizing taste of winemaking regions around the world, treasures that can elevate a simple dinner to both a dining and educational experience—what transforming a wine list is all about.

Marisa D’Vari is a New York City-based wine writer and competition judge.