

Need help choosing wine? Books & Books course has answers

by Bill Richardson / Community Contributor
March 5th, 2013



Americans now drink more wine than the Europeans – consuming more wine than even the French! The crowds flocking to the recent South Beach Food and Wine Festival confirm that the USA has become a nation of serious wine drinkers.

After some 3,000 years of sophisticated wine drinking, young people in France and Italy are switching to carbonated sodas during the day and to the latest fashionable cocktail in the evenings. Sadly, wine is no longer part of the traditional daily landscape for the youth of Europe or South America. But, as the sun sets on the bistros of the Mediterranean, it rises on the cafés of Miami – specifically the Café at Books & Books in Coral Gables.

For so long indifferent to the pleasures of wine, North Americans are now conclusively shrugging off the Prohibition lure of hard liquor and are finally embracing the more cultivated pleasures of the grape. No longer limited to a choice between White Zinfandel or Jug Red, the selection of wines now available to the American consumer is not just impressive – it is overwhelming.

Forget about the specialty wine stores, of which there is no shortage in South Florida; just visit your local supermarket to see an awe-inspiring but daunting “wall of wine.”

Far bigger than the selection of breakfast cereals, washing detergents or even cheeses, the Publix on Le Jeune Road, for example, offers customers a selection of wines from a dozen countries. Within each of the different countries there is a further choice of sub-regions: Burgundy, Bordeaux, Alsace or Rhone in France; Piedmont, Tuscany or Puglia in Italy; North Island, South Island, Marlborough or Martinborough in New Zealand, for example.

Within each geographic region there is an even more confusing selection among a few dozen different grape varieties, ranging from Chardonnay and Merlot to Primitivo and Gewurztraminer. Even if you have decided upon a Sangiovese grape from Tuscany to accompany your pasta – do you choose Chianti or Brunello? And what year offers the best vintage?

Today’s consumer is probably facing more than a couple of hundred different wines from which to choose. No wonder the average American shopper is overwhelmed by the range of decisions when selecting a bottle for the evening meal.

Mitchell Kaplan, the founder/owner of Books & Books, recognized this problem a couple of years ago when he first invited Coral Gables author and respected oenophile Patrick Alexander to offer a 12-hour wine appreciation class at his Aragon Avenue store.

Over a six-week period of two-hour classes, Alexander walks his students through the history of wine, explaining how it is made, discussing the differences between the grape varieties as well as describing the different wine-growing regions of the world.

During the course of the program, students taste 24 different wines and eventually vote to select their four favorites. Chef Allen Susser, the celebrity innovator of New World Cuisine, then prepares a four-course meal to pair with the selected wines, and the dinner is served, following the sixth and final class.

Although the SOBE Wine and Food Festival might suggest that South Florida residents are experts when it comes to selecting wines, in fact the typically well-educated professionals who attend the Books & Books classes are the first to confess that they are overwhelmed when confronted by the supermarket wine wall.

“Professor Alexander’s classes have opened my eyes to the wonderful choices that face us whenever we select a bottle of wine for dinner,” says Miriam Sredni who drove from Bal Harbor against rush-hour traffic to attend the Books & Books program.

It is true that Miami has become a “foodie” and wine connoisseur’s haven – but wine has such a complex history, reaching back some 9,000 years, that it will require more than a fashionable Miami martini to overshadow its complex and subtle heritage. Not that there is anything wrong with fashion – or fun.

Despite Alexander’s UM background, the wine appreciation nights at Books & Books are neither dry nor academic. As Irving Fields, the Books & Books Café manager explains: “Patrick’s classes are a learning experience with international wines, English humor and an irrepressible South Florida sense of serious irreverence.”

The program has been running now for two years and shows no sign of stopping; each class sells out as soon as it is announced. The classes, which are held between 6 and 8 p.m. on Monday evenings, are small and intimate with a maximum of 16 students who have usually become firm friends by the end of the program. Alexander maintains contact with all his students by e-mail, and the staff at Books & Books is constantly being asked for news of follow-up classes while hearing how helpful and informative the program has been.

The most recent class finished on Feb. 10 when Chef Allen presented the following four-course menu:

- **Mahi Mahi Ceviche:** Avocado, red onion, cilantro, mango ketchup and yucca chips, served with a deliciously refreshing, 2012 Kim Crawford Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand's Marlborough region on the South Island.

- **Chef Allen's White Truffle Mac and Cheese:** Cheddar and Parmesan, toasted bread crumbs and herbs, served with a 2011 Rosso di Montepulciano, Sangiovesi from Italy's fabled Tuscany region.

- **Grilled Skirt Steak Chimichurri:** Garlic-mashed potatoes with fresh asparagus, served with a 2010 Vicious Zin, Zinfandel from California's Amador County.

- **Dessert:** A deliciously thin pastry *tarte aux pommes*, served with a delicately sweet 2011 Adolph Mueller, Riesling (Spatlese) from Niersteiner on the Rhine valley in Germany.

The next series of six classes is scheduled to begin, with typical South Florida élan, on All Fool's Day, April 1. For more information contact Cristina Nosti at cristina@booksandbooks.com and visit www.GablesWine.com