

Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

On the Menu: Wines Not in Stores

Restaurants Offer Hidden Treasures; The Refosco Lesson

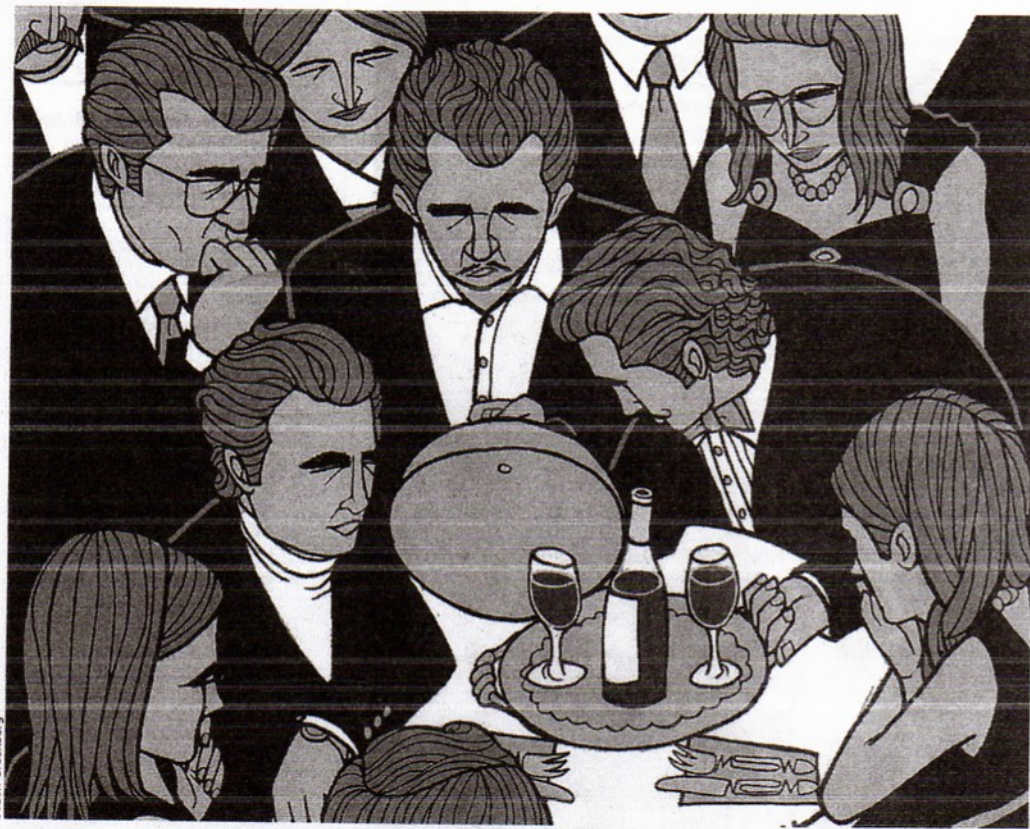
HAVE YOU HAD a Refosco recently? We hadn't, either.

Refosco is an Italian red wine we used to drink from time to time when we were younger. We remember it being fun and slightly rustic. But we rarely see Refosco anymore and pretty much forgot about it. So you can imagine our surprise when we visited a restaurant recently that was serving a wine made predominantly of refosco—from California. It was called Mattia from Palmira winery, and it was 55% Refosco, 30% Cabernet Franc and 15% Merlot. The Refosco grape is so rare in California that the state doesn't report how many acres are planted, but the number is very small.

We ordered it, of course, and it was outstanding, with lusty earthiness and real vibrancy. We had never seen this wine before, and there's a good reason for that: The winery made only 280 cases, and most went to restaurants. Only a small percentage found its way to retailers.

Over the past couple of months we've written about some of the small annoyances of wine service at restaurants. Readers have suggested quite a few more. But all of this helpful criticism shouldn't obscure something very important: There are all sorts of terrific wines that you will usually find only at restaurants. If you are going to expand your palate and taste some really unusual and interesting stuff, restaurants are key.

We have written in the past about how to decode a wine list, but no point is more important than this: Look for the unusual. Quite a few good wineries focus their sales on restaurants, not retail stores. Not only that, but ordering a wine that you've never seen before makes the whole issue of markup far less relevant. Whenever someone says to us, "Why should I pay three times what I'd pay for a wine at the corner store?" we want to say, "Why are you ordering a wine you see



Jason Greenberg

etals from California need a lot of education for people to get behind them." His wines, he said, "are purchased by and sold by really excited sommeliers." In our experience, an excited sommelier makes for a fun dinner.

We recently visited a restaurant because we saw on its wine list online that it had Littorai, one of California's sought-after Chardonnays. The winery's total production is about 3,000 cases. A third of that goes to the winery's mailing list and the other two-thirds to restaurants.

One California maker relies on 'excited sommeliers' to explain his wines.

Ted Lemon, the owner-wine-maker, says he doesn't have any bias against retailers, but that's how the winery has always done it and, with so little supply, it works fine. Besides, he says, "it's important that each bottle be an ambassador. We want to get the word out there as far and wide as we can," and get-

a restaurant in New York called The Modern at the Museum of Modern Art. We did our homework beforehand—considering the ease of the Internet these days and how many restaurants have sites, we'd really recommend this—and discovered that the chef and wine director were both from Alsace. Our advice is always to order a wine that seems to be the passion of the restaurant, so when we got there, we told the sommelier to wow us with an Alsatian wine that cost around \$100 or less (it was a special occasion). He did not know we are wine writers.

From the cellar he brought a 1985 Alsatian Pinot Gris from Léon Beyer. That's right—a 22-year-old white. It was golden colored and smelled of fruit, earth and wisdom, and it was, in a word, spectacular, with the kind of complexity and depth that only age can bring. This is simply not an experience we could have had by dropping in to the local wine store.

A Winning 'Threesome'

These experiences are not available only at big-city restaurants. In Tallahassee, Fla., recently, we dropped into a cute lit-

Mexican restaurants these days offer Mexican wines. A little Indian place we visited recently was pouring a white Beaujolais by the glass. We don't often see white Beaujolais, and we're not generally big fans of it, anyway, often finding it thin. But this one, from Jean-Paul Brun, was excellent, with ripe Chardonnay fruit and good acidity that was perfect with our Indian food.

Our favorite little Italian place, a cash-only, family spot, has an owner who cares about wine, so he always features a wine special that he found himself (it's written in chalk on a blackboard—it's that kind of place). Recently, it was 2001 Truchard Cabernet from Napa Valley for \$28. It was earthy and broad and, interestingly, reminded us very much of a good Italian wine. Having a bottle with any age at a restaurant is always a treat, and 2001 was a very good year.

Good wineries work very hard to get their wines into restaurants, and many restaurants work very hard to offer interesting, different wines. You are the third part of that equation. If you see something new and different on the list, take a chance and order it