



Water Sommeliers: Why They (Should They) Exist

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The job of a wine steward is built upon at least two traditions—those of the French sommelier and the British butler. In France, sommeliers became part of the postwar culinary revolution, chronicled by Julia Child and others. That revolution resurrected the *nouvelle cuisine* of a century earlier with a new personality: more adventurous, more complex, and more cosmopolitan.

The wine rules of a century earlier had been, like the recipes, simpler: If a recipe originated in a particular place, then the wine of that region was the appropriate choice. But the one- and two-star restaurants of postwar France demanded a greater understanding of more kinds of wine. Sommeliers in the 1950s and '60s helped resurrect nearly abandoned appellations such as Côte-Rôtie, Hermitage, and Savennières and virtually extinct grapes like Viognier. Alsace's vinous fortunes smoldered in the ashes of World War II for a few years longer, but when the region finally reemerged, it was thanks to this group of wine professionals plying their trade in French restaurants.

Before this time, the proprietor or the maître d' had held the keys to the cellar; once the wine had been selected (based strictly upon tradition, prestige, and the pocketbook of the diner), the servers were expected to fill the glasses as quickly as possible and allow the guests to become as drunk as time and social standing allowed.

The British, as with so many aspects of wine, arrived at the concept of sophisticated and savvy wine service years before the French even realized there was such a thing. After all, it was Samuel Pepys in his 1626-1628 diaries who first wrote about and celebrated wines of difference, remarking upon "a sort of French wine called Ho-Bryan which hath a good and most particular taste which I never before encountered." That, of course, was Haut-Brion. Throughout centuries of empire, the British became experts in the foods of faraway lands and the wines (and other drinks) that might accompany them. By the time George Saintsbury published his *Notes on a Cellar-Book* (1865, reprinted by the University of California Press), a gentleman of breeding was expected to have a cellar filled with the proper wines, along with a proper butler to select, handle, and serve them.



Which is to say that the modern sommelier has a model—indeed, a number of models—from which to draw his or her notions of behavior, comportment, and technique. In recent years, that role has been extended to other beverages, including even the water we drink.

The first water sommelier

In 2001, New York's Ritz-Carlton Battery Park made a rather loud splash by introducing the world's first water sommelier. I haven't found anyone other than Filip Wretman whose job description has been limited solely to the service of water in a hotel or restaurant. The position was short-lived, however; even today, the people I talked to at the Ritz-Carlton didn't wish to be quoted about it.

The press had a field day back then: "What's next? Tea and beer sommeliers?" Well, yes, but that's another story. Most of the articles written at the time were rife with puns and snark; apparently, a lot of people hadn't noticed that different beverages taste different. Cabernet

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Sauvignon from Bordeaux tastes different from Cabernet grown in California, and water tastes different, too, if only the drinker will stop and take notice. Maybe it's more difficult than with wine, since water needs to be tasted to understand a distinction. Whereas most wines can be limned from their aromatics, the mineral and textural characteristics that separate one water from another are almost undetectable by the nose. On the other hand, the sparkle in Perrier, the crazy quilt of minerals in Apollinaris, and the pure saltiness in Vichy Catalan are instantly noticeable on the palate.

So are all waters different? The answer is “yes and no.” Many of the bottled waters in the American marketplace are nothing more than tap water with the mineral content removed through reverse osmosis or filtration processes. That makes the water neutral and inoffensive, but many purists insist that such water has lost the good along with the bad. We call that throwing the baby out with the bathwater—though I've never understood how anyone would make such a mistake.

A quick primer

Bottled waters can be roughly divided into five groups: sparkling, mineral, still-bottled, distilled, and deionized. (For more detailed information, I would recommend Michael Mascha's excellent site, www.finewaters.com.) The last two categories are often used for industrial or medicinal purposes; deionized water is required for many chemical processes, but tastes little different from distilled water. Neither has much flavor nor any well-known brands. Perhaps surprisingly, neither seems particularly pleasurable with wine, either. If the water has been skillfully distilled, there is no aroma or flavor, so it can't act as a differentiator to the wine. Distilled water provides hydration, but unlike food or a true mineral water, it doesn't give the mind anything else to focus on. As a result, the accompanying wine can become less interesting.

A sparkling (carbonated) or mineral water is classified by the amount of mineral content—and by the character of that content, to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr. Some waters, such as Panna or Fiji, are considered mild in minerality, and thus can offer a gentle counterpoint to more delicate wines. Others, such as Vichy Catalan, are so rich in minerals and salt that they can overwhelm any wine other than the biggest and most unctuous.



Ritz-Carlton Battery Park in New York.

The average drinker defines water in broad terms: salty or not, acidic or not, mild or intense. The industry, not surprisingly, is far more specific. Producers use numbers such as total dissolved solids (TDS) to describe bottled waters; a higher TDS number indicates a more powerful flavor. Voss, a decidedly soft French water, has a TDS of 22, while Badoit, another French water, is far more robust, at 1,200 TDS. Mineral waters are supposed to come from an underground water source and contain no less than 250 TDS. At the screamingly high end of the scale are such waters as Germany's Apollinaris (2,650 TDS) and Spain's Vichy Catalan (2,900 TDS).

The industry also refers to pH, which gives a pretty good indication of the softness of any water. Since the natural pH of the mouth is 7, anything far below that will have a fairly acidic edge, as with Perrier (whose pH is 5.5). Perrier's bite is only intensified by its prickle of bubbles, which can dance in sprightly fashion with sweet wines. Just as Champagne's typical sweetness is mitigated by its spritzy carbon dioxide, so a sparkling water can make a sweet wine seem less sweet and, in the case of some sticky-sweet wines, less ponderous. Conversely, mild still-bottled waters (which do not always run deep, it turns out) let the sweetness in a sweet wine shine through.



Who's carrying the water?

Even though the Ritz-Carlton's water experiment went down the drain, many, if not most, restaurants offer more bottled waters than they did a few years ago. After surveying a number of chains, however, I found none that had a comprehensive water-training program for its staff. Few were even interested in training their staffs in the finer points of water. Why wouldn't they want to make sure their servers knew everything possible about such a profitable product? Probably because bottled water has become something of a litmus test for green and carbon-footprint efforts, both at home and in restaurants and bars. Many people now believe the cost and the impact of trucking plastic bottles of water thousands of miles make little sense if there is already a perfectly good system available for water delivery: the tap.

One steakhouse-chain executive, who wished to remain anonymous (see how fraught with tension this subject is?), noted that the company's next restaurant might have its own tap-water-filtration system, and as a result, "we're looking at the sales implications, especially at a time like this," of giving away filtered water. The executive also admitted that "we're focusing upon bottled waters less and less."

Another anonymous beverage professional with long experience in multiple venues and concepts said, "Bottled water is at a crossroads. It's been the accepted, suggested sell for many servers in the restaurants for years. For many of them, it's the way to lead off the service: 'Are we drinking bottled water tonight, and would you prefer bubbles or still?' We've got to decide what is the right bottled-water policy."

This professional and others at his company are concerned about their reputation: Should they be greener? Should they have a policy against bottled water or one that merely offers the consumer the widest possible choice? As the same steakhouse executive wondered later in our interview, "Should we continue to upsell water in a market that might be flat? Bottled water is a luxury item that might not be as important to the consumer right now."

Not everyone was so conflicted about these turbulent waters. Michael Bonadies of the 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville, Ky., said, "We have a big green focus, so while we have bottled water available, we don't exactly push it. The bottled water Aphrodisiac, from a Kentucky spring, is sourced as close to the hotel as possible. In Lou-



Madeline Triffon, MS, director of wine for the Matt Prentice Restaurant Group in Detroit (left); beverage writer Jordan Mackay (right).

isville, we have some of the best local water in the country; that's what makes bourbon great."

Madeline Triffon, MS, of Detroit's Matt Prentice Restaurant Group, is equally proud of the local water: "In Detroit, thanks to the Great Lakes, we have a terrific source of fine water, so many of our guests are happy to be served tap. We do offer both still and sparkling in bottles, and our most high-profile venue, Coach Insignia, has the service staff trained to ask the guests, as they are seated, if they would like bottled or tap. This does generate revenue and is particularly effective with international guests."

When in Rome

Bottled water is certainly promoted more today at top restaurants in Western Europe than in the United States. Beverage writer Jordan Mackay, whose new book is called *Passion for Pinot* (Ten Speed Press, 2009), noted that at a recent dinner in Rome's La Pergola, "I was presented with a wine list—a really long one—and then I realized that it was the water list. There were eight of us, all drinking the same wine, but different water. So everybody had their own bucket of ice behind them, and the dinner became all about tasting each other's waters."

Mackay reported that there wasn't anyone in the party who knew much about the waters on the list, and that he was shocked by some of them. "Some were sulfurous, some were salty," he said. After choosing a high-mineral-content wine, he recalled, "it coated my mouth, and the wine came off hard. Even the food didn't do a lot for me because the water was such an incredible presence."

Water in the future

In an era of declining sales and margins, it's unlikely that restaurateurs will begin hiring



WATER INTO WINE

Water might have been turned into wine in the New Testament, but most wine is going to be consumed *with* water. Anyone purporting to be knowledgeable about how the two interact needs to sit down and taste them together, fully admitting that no flavor experience is completely universal. That is to say, some of us will find some combinations wonderful, while others will find them merely acceptable; some combinations will strike some tasters as reprehensible, while other tasters may say “whatever.” As with wine, the best sommelier finds combinations that appeal to the greatest percentage of people.

Waters with high total dissolved solids (TDS) can be so intense as to overwhelm both wines and foods. But that intensity has its uses: extremely salty water will buffer powerful and tannic wines, much as salt can remove the bitterness of eggplant. Like salty food, a salty water will make a big wine taste lighter and milder. A low-TDS water will allow a powerful wine to taste more powerful, but a subtle wine will be quickly subdued into dissipation. Softer, milder wines need to be accompanied by less mineral-intensive waters, as could be said about subtler, lighter-bodied foods.

Waters with low pH are distinctly acidic. Just as tart wines marry well with salty or even buttery, creamy dishes, tart waters can do the same. Tart waters make tart wines seem well balanced; on the other hand, they make sweet wines seem sweeter. Water with a higher pH will seem soft and mild. If it’s paired with a mild wine, the wine won’t be challenged, which is probably a good thing. If the wine is big and rich, the water won’t seem as refreshing and the wine will still seem powerful, which may also be a good thing if you like powerful wines.

Sparkling waters, like sparkling wines, seem drier than they really are, and thus will lighten up fried or greasy foods. Try a Champagne with fried calamari, and you’ll get a sense of how sparkling water works.

Most tap water is chlorinated (unless it is filtered). Chlorine, especially in high amounts, can knock back the flavors in a glass of wine, muting some of the more delicate notes. Frankly, this characteristic is unnoticeable to most people, but a light, delicate wine will be less impressive when paired with tap water.

Although these issues may seem like inside baseball, applicable to only a few true believers, people will often say that a favorite wine wasn’t as impressive on a particular evening and later wonder why. Maybe it was the bottle, maybe it was the company—or maybe it was the water.

water sommeliers any time soon. Therefore, even with their customary lack of free time, smart sommeliers ought to start examining their water programs (see boxes).

“I would rather encourage owners to keep investing in sommelier staff, who can easily wear the ‘agua-ier’ hat as well,” said Triffon. “Sommeliers are going to have to continue to justify their jobs for the foreseeable future. Helping to manage and sell the water program is something they can do, but they’re going to have to show some expertise in the field.” A quick taste and a glance at the pH and TDS of a water should tell you everything you need to know. 🍷



French mineral water and vin de pays.

TOP BOTTLED WATERS

	TDS	pH	Price
SPARKLING			
Apollinaris	2,650	5.8	\$35
Evian	357	7.2	\$30
Perrier	475	5.5	\$28
			(750 ml bottles)
San Pellegrino	1,109	7.7	\$30
Vichy Catalan	2,900	8.3	\$38
Volvic	109	7.0	\$36
Voss	500	6.4	\$38
			(800 ml bottles)
STILL			
Badoit	1,200	6.0	\$45
Fiji	160	7.5	\$34
Panna	188	8.2	\$30
Vittel	841	7.5	\$40
Voss	22	6.4	\$38

Prices are estimated retail and are for 12 1-liter bottles unless otherwise noted.