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FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

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plus a vibrant sense of place



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GASTROTOURISM
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CALIFORNIA SCENTS OF PLACE

WINE REPORT JEFFERY LINDENMUTH REPORTS HOW NAPA VALLEY SOMMELIERS ARE USING THEIR WINE LISTS TO MAP THE FRUITFUL REGION'S VINEYARDS.

With the advent of GPS and personal navigation devices, the art of exploration by origami-like folding road maps is largely nostalgic. But at chef **Ken Frank's** French-inspired **La Toque**, there exists one *carte* able to locate this Napa Valley restaurant with both precision and unmatched *joie de vivre*—the wine list. “We offer 120 Napa Valley selections on our Cabernet Sauvignon pages,” says **Scott Tracy**, wine director. “People come to drink Cabernet Sauvignon, so we like to highlight the different California appellations. We begin by assuming we’re at the center of the universe and expand from there.” Being a French restaurant, Bordeaux still receives an admirable 60 entries.

Likewise, each item on Frank's menu is listed with an appropriate wine, predominantly local selections, whether grilled Hawaiian swordfish as a “pepper steak” with a baby baked potato and Jack Daniel's black pepper sauce with Luna Sangiovese Reserve Napa Valley 2005 or Niman Ranch rib eye with cheddared pearl tapioca and Rutherford red wine sauce paired with Paradigm Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville 2004. “Our wine list has two areas of focus, our neighbors and our cuisine,” explains Tracy.

These selections are offered in a four course pairing option that includes four half glasses at the price of \$62, a proposition that might seem pricey for just two glasses of wine, and one that nonetheless is selected by a full two-thirds of diners. “In wine country we are catering to people who may have toured cult wineries and tasted great wine all day. They are traveling and may have dined in New York or Las Vegas the night before. We can't just pour good wine. We need to be great,” insists Tracy, noting the wine tasting program accounts for over 80 percent of La Toque's wine purchases.

Tracy and the staff arrive prepared to overdeliver on expectations—ready to arrange a customer visit to a small winery, attend weekend winery field trips, and secure the cult wines that most East Coasters only read about in Internet chat rooms. Frank,

who declares that were he not a chef he'd happily be a sommelier, clearly delights in cooking for wine lovers and their wines. “As my style of cuisine has evolved, it has become more and more wine-friendly. It's all about balance and harmony. You will not find much in terms of hot, spicy, or sour dishes on my menus. Exotic vinegars may be interesting, but they kill wine. Sauce, first and foremost, is a great bridge between the plate and the glass,” says Frank. According to Tracy, Frank knows how to leave a place for wine.



Solbar's list gets beyond Cabernet and Chardonnay but rarely strays from its Napa Valley home.

For all the enthusiasm and knowledge of the typical wine country diner, many wine lists retain a West Coast sensibility and playfulness. At **Martini House**, wine director **Rob Renteria** front-loads the wine list with page headers ripped from the headlines: “Women Winemakers We Love,” “Cork-Free Wines,” “Biodynamic Producers.” Perhaps most irreverent for a Michelin-starred restaurant in St. Helena boasting 650 wine selections and a *Wine Spectator* Best of Award of Excellence is the T.W.E.R.P. page, or Temporary Wine Economic Relief Program. The collection of 40 wines challenges the notion that there's no value in California, offering Gallo Family Vineyards Laguna Vineyard Chardonnay Russian River Valley 2005 for

\$48 and Beckman Vineyards Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Santa Ynez Valley 2005 for \$48. “It's intended to be a free-for-all page that showcases some of our value-oriented wines,” says Renteria.

Like most West Coast wine lists, Martini House finds its New World fodder close to home but doesn't fear to pit California against France's finest, with an extensive list of Burgundies, both red and white. “If you plan to have a noteworthy wine list in the heart of a wine-growing region, I think it makes sense to pay homage to the originators. My philosophy is to offer the best wine of the best regions,” says Renteria. Faced with a glut of great wines outside his front door and too many notable producers eager to join the list,

Renteria arrived at an evenhanded and fun way to select by-the-glass pours. He calls it “an ol’fashioned smackdown.” Each week, Martini House presents a Battle of Vines, where local wineries duke it out in the court of patron opinion to determine which continues to be poured by the glass. After tasting a 2 1/2 ounce pour of each (\$18), tasters weigh in on who lives to pour another day.

Patrick Kellaher, general manager/partner at chef **Cindy Pawlcyn’s Mustards Grill** in Napa, says the wine list is like a story of relationships that the restaurant shares with the customer. “I like grand restaurants in Las Vegas and New York, but somehow you always feel like you’re bearing witness, rather than being part of something,” he observes. “I think people coming to California really want to get a sense of place. One way we do that is by acknowledging we’re helping out the guy down the road, rather

rabbit tostada with red chile salsa, black beans, and feta or stuffed piquillo peppers with cumin braised beef and tomato salsa, they also serve to season the by-the-glass wine list. California favorites like Mumm Blanc de Noirs Napa Valley NV (\$9.50) and Nickel & Nickel Syrah Darien Vineyard Russian River Valley 2005 (\$16) are joined by a quartet of Spanish Sherries and a couple of French Champagnes.

Champagne is one of the few concessions to non-California wines at **Solbar**, the restaurant at **Solage Calistoga**, opened in 2007 by **Auberge Resorts**. “The chef adores Champagne and feels it can really go with his food, so we’re not committed to staying in California. I might also sneak in a German Riesling or a Grüner Veltliner, but only wines that are not duplicated here,” explains **Kris Margerum**, Auberge Resorts wine director. “Generally, the more local I can get, the better.” Sticking close to home,



Left to right: Goat cheese ravioli in a white wine/carrot broth gets paired with a glass of Chardonnay at Mustards Grill. Vine-covered arbors and trellises amplify the regional ambience at Martini House. At La Toque, a plancha seared sea scallop resting on squid ink/white wine pearl tapioca is stroked with Hollandaise and served with a 2006 Patz & Hall Hyde Vineyard Carneros Chardonnay. Photo by Tia Gavin.

than someone on an airplane.”

The Mustards list extols the depth of these relationships with verticals of Napa Cabernet, like four vintages of Colgin Cellars, five of Harlan Estate, and nine of Araujo Estate, stretching back to 1991 and priced at \$400 each. As more affordable options, the list celebrates progressive California blends while listing the grape percentages for wines like Terlato Family Vineyards Devil’s Peak Napa Valley 2005 (64 percent Cabernet Franc, 25 percent Merlot, 11 percent Cabernet Sauvignon) at \$83 and Spann Vineyards Chardonnay-Viognier Sonoma County 2006 (59 percent Chardonnay, 41 percent Viognier) at \$35.

At Mustards’ casual sibling, **Cindy’s Backstreet Kitchen**, the wine list slants ever more local and more accessible, designed to cater to regulars over wine country tourists. “Backstreet is about the town of St. Helena, about the locals and their friends, so we keep a keen ear to what they want and what they’re willing to pay,” says Kellaher.

Just as global tastes infuse the small plates menu with the likes of

Margerum locates more than essential Cabernet, offering Black Bart Marsanne Stagecoach Vineyard Napa Valley 2005, Benessere Vineyards Sangiovese Napa Valley 2005, and C. Beck Petite Sirah Napa Valley 2004, for example.

Allowing a higher turnover of producers and flexibility to respond to its younger clientele, Solbar’s 250-label list is organized first by grape varietal, then California American Viticultural Area, making it more dynamic than the 1,700-label wine tome at Napa country inn **Auberge du Soleil**. “At Auberge, Cab is king and Chardonnay does well. It’s the opposite here. Pinot Noir is followed by sales of a lot of Syrah and Zinfandel,” elaborates Margerum, observing that wine insiders often feel they know Cabernet thoroughly and that younger diners want something fresh and new. Within the ever-changing landscape of West Coast wine, marked by new AVAs, a tumult of tiny producers, and outside-the-box varietals, locals and visitors may find that Napa’s wine lists, mapped by dedicated sommeliers and chefs, are today’s best guides. ■