



**Sommeliers: A Labor Day tribute**  
**Saluting those who pair wines and meals**

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I always felt sorry for Spiderman and Superman, since they didn't garner the true adoration they deserved. They swoop in, save the world and are gone in seconds, before revealing their true identity. If the public knew them, wouldn't they be showered in enviable perks and get all sorts of chick play? Seems a waste of good fame. But maybe they're in it just for the love of the work, like an everyday superhero who saves people from themselves. Someone like a sommelier (SOM mel YAY).

These stewards of wine circle a dining room, arriving in time to provide guidance when a flummoxed diner needs them most. They leap difficult asparagus dishes in a single bound, transform an otherwise blah meal into something worth paying for and, most importantly, save you from bad decisions.

Some people might think sommeliers are designed to extract as much of your paycheck as possible -- and I'm certain there are plenty of greedy Dr. Evils that vainly bear the sommelier title -- but honest ones try to make you happy with your wine choice. Sommelier Chad Munsey of The Grotto in Jacksonville, Fla., says, "A good sommelier is someone who listens and asks questions: 'Are you looking for red or white?,' 'Rich and full-bodied or lighter and sweeter?.'" And, of course, they request a price range, since that's what smarts if they get it wrong. I've been on the embarrassing end of that equation a few times, and I felt like I got a nose full of kryptonite. Recently, a sommelier steered me away from an older vintage of cabernet sauvignon that cost around \$45 and "recommended" another bottle. Although the wine was quite tasty, when the bill came and a \$100 price tag stared out at me, I felt swindled (and like a dumbass). Trust was broken, and I haven't relied on him, or the restaurant, since.

John Duncan of Bonterra in Charlotte, N.C., puts it simply: "Put people with the right glass of wine and don't rob them."

A main reason I seek out sommeliers is to match up a restaurant's food with their wine list. Let's face it: The sommelier has probably eaten every dish on the menu and should know the wines. Duncan tries to marry the two: price and dish. But he also unravels the needs of the guest without allowing his interpretation of what is right for the diner interfere with his suggestions. "I don't try to force anything," he says.

If you're looking for new wine horizons, the sommelier is invaluable. They've often met the winemakers and know the hot, happening stuff on the list. Cliff Bramble of Rathbun's in Atlanta stocks many obscure, small-production wines, and his clientele expect to be led to the promised land. With his passion for the juice and introducing people to fresh things, he gladly obliges.

But like so many other professionals, sommeliers are a mixed breed. There are poseurs who think reading one book and attending a class creates an expert, and then there are the real sommeliers, who have studied for years, have explored vineyards and who often have taken the official exams. The Court of Master Sommeliers, an internationally recognized nonprofit organization established in 1969, separates professionals using three certification courses and exams: introductory, advanced and master. Although not necessary to be proficient in wine service, the grueling exams really separate the juice from the grape. Ask questions before you trust, but trust you should.