

ONE BOTTLE: The 2005 Allegrini Palazzo della Torre by JOSHUA BAER

Last winter, my wife and I ate dinner at a trendy restaurant in an American city. To avoid litigation, I am going to refer to the restaurant as the Sacred Cow. (There may be actual restaurants by that name in American cities. The restaurant where we ate was not one of those actual restaurants. I am using the Sacred Cow as a fictitious name.)

When I eat dinner in a restaurant, the first thing I do is look at the wine list. For me, the wine list works as a kind of early warning system. If the restaurant is run by people who do not know how to order good wines, or, if the restaurant is run by people who charge quadruple retail for the wines on their list, I lower my expectations about the meal and order a Negra Modelo.

The Sacred Cow had the 2003 Robert Chevillon Nuits St. George “Les Perrières” on their list. Chevillon’s red Burgundies are special, so I ordered a bottle. Our waiter asked if we wanted him to pour the wine now, or later, with our entrées. I looked at the menu. One of the appetizers was “Polenta al Funghi.” Few things in life taste better than a bowl of polenta on a winter evening, and the polenta would work well—or so I thought—with the “Perrières,” so I asked our waiter to bring the “Perrières” to the table and open it, and to bring us two orders of the polenta so that we could drink the wine and eat the polenta while we decided on our entrées.

Two minutes later, we were drinking the “Perrières.” The wine was stunning. It made us happy that we had chosen to eat dinner at the Sacred Cow. Ten minutes later, our polenta arrived and the trouble began. The polenta tasted like it had been seasoned with the pickled carcass of a sewer rat. It took us two slices of bread, each, before we could drink the “Perrières” without it tasting like vinegar.

We asked our waiter if there was vinegar in the polenta. He said he would check with the kitchen, but the restaurant got busy and he never got back to us. The rest of our dinner was edible. After we paid, I asked our waiter if it would be all right for me to go into the kitchen and ask the chef about the polenta. He escorted me into the kitchen and introduced me to the chef.

“Absolutely,” said the chef. “We use a thirty-year-old vinegar from Portugal, aged in old port barrels. Ferran Adrià stirs it into his polenta. That’s where I got the idea.”

“Who is Ferran Adrià?” I said.

The chef laughed. “You’ve never heard of Ferran Adrià?”

“No.”

“He’s the chef at El Bulli in Spain. They have a twelve-month waiting list for reservations. He’s the number one chef in the world.”

A few months after our dinner at the Sacred Cow, my wife and I ate dinner in a hotel restaurant on the outskirts of a famous American resort town. To avoid litigation, I am going to call the hotel Le Grande Attitude Resort and Spa. After looking



at the wine list and the menu, I ordered a bottle of the 2004 Jean-Noël Gagnard Chassagne-Montrachet “Les Caillerets” and two bowls of lobster bisque. The “Caillerets” and the bisque were delicious. For our entrées, we both ordered the New York steak, medium rare. You know the rest. Our steaks tasted like road kill poached in formaldehyde. After two slices of bread each, we finished the “Caillerets.” In the kitchen, I asked the chef if our steaks had been seasoned with vinegar. “Oh, yes,” he said. “We get our vinegar directly from Modena. Mario Batali uses the same vinegar in his caponata.”

This is an appeal to chefs everywhere. Vinegar is not salt. Vinegar is not butter. Vinegar is not olive oil. Vinegar works well in salad dressing, in barbecue sauce, and on fish and chips. If you want to perform culinary experiments with vinegar, test those experiments on yourself and your staff, with wine, before you serve them to your clients. Restaurants are not laboratories. They are places to eat. Those of us who enjoy wine with dinner do not want to pair dishes containing vinegar with the wines on your wine list. We have survived tower food, tiny portions, flavored foams, squeeze bottle “paintings,” and lavender crème brûlée. Spare us the Vinegar Era. We do not care if Daniel Boulud gargles with it, Alice Waters waters her roses with it, or Wolfgang Puck splashes it on as aftershave. Stop infusing your dishes with vinegar. Or, if you must add vinegar to everything you cook, please list everything on your menu as a salad.

Which brings us to the 2005 Allegrini Palazzo della Torre.

In the glass, the Palazzo della Torre is a secret full of promises. Homer’s “wine dark sea” comes to mind. On the palate, the wine manages to be simultaneously refreshing and decadent. It offers a surplus of depth and a shortage of pretense. The silky attack yields to a luxurious finish. It is impossible to drink this wine without reflecting on how lucky you are to be drinking it. At \$15 to \$24 a bottle (in liquor stores nationwide, and at Whole Foods Market), it is the best red wine you can buy for \$25 or less.

Vinegar comes from *vin aigre*, which is Old French for “sour wine.” If you are a chef, open a bottle of the 2005 Palazzo della Torre and taste the wine. Now eat something with vinegar in it, and re-taste the wine. Is that an experience you want your clients to have?

If the food you serve says something about you, what does the indiscriminate use of vinegar say? It says you are too busy to taste your food, is what it says. Life is short. Vinegar is sour. If you refuse to taste your food or your wine, why should we?

One Bottle is dedicated to the appreciation of good wines and good times, one bottle at a time. The name “One Bottle” and the contents of this column are ©2009 by onebottle.com. Joshua Baer can be reached at jb@onebottle.com. For back issues of One Bottle, visit onebottle.com

