

EX.IT

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GIVING WINE AN
EXPRESSION...

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ALAIN DUCASSE AT THE DORCHESTER - MAIN DINING ROOM



RUBEN, THIBAUT, JEAN-PHILIPPE, ENRICO



originating from Belgium with a very passionate food and wine background, Ruben's first foray into wine began as an intern in Monaco with DUCASSE Paris at the age of 19. This experience set the tone for the years to come, and in 2010, he moved to London as Commis Sommelier at Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester.

Ruben then relocated to Paris in 2012, where he took on the role of Sommelier in Le Jules Verne, the restaurant located on the Eiffel Tower. Over the next two years, he continued to build on his knowledge, and while still at Le Jules Verne, took the opportunity to assist in numerous DUCASSE Paris establishments, including Aux Lyonnais, Benoit, and the fish restaurant, Rech.

In 2014, Ruben then returned to The Dorchester and the London restaurant scene, as Head Sommelier for the newly refurbished The Grill at The Dorchester, where he worked to create an extensive 600-bin wine list. Following that, in August 2016, Ruben joined the team of Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester as Assistant Sommelier, at the behest of then Head Sommelier, Christopher Bothwell.

Promoted to Head Sommelier of the restaurant within two years, Ruben now leads a team of 5, all of whom share his objective: delivering tailor-made and memorable service to guests. He excels in advising the best pairings from the 1,000-bin wine list created with Gerard Margeon, Ducasse Paris Executive Wine Director. This talent stems from his capacity to listen and anticipate his guests' expectations, combined with a new-wave approach to teamwork with Executive Chef Jean-Philippe Blondet.

EX.IT catches up with Ruben Despot...

Training your palate, your sense of smell and sense of memory... how did you find your way to become one of the most sought after sommeliers?

I have always been intrigued by the range of aromas one can smell in a specific wine or spirit. And I strongly believe that it takes a lot of skill to obtain a wine with complexity. When tasting a wine, I always look at the details of the structure and at the message the producer wanted to share with the end consumer. Each glass of wine tells a story and speaks about a specific grape variety, a region or a philosophy. A palate is like a hard disk where you store information about all the wines you have tasted in the past. One can develop its palate by continuously making an assessment of the wines tasted. It is like adding to your experience in a way.

Take us through your training and tell when you realized your path to being a sommelier and how it helped you as a sommelier today.

When I was still in catering school in Bruges, one of the exercises we did was to sample 20 different spirits and liquors without knowing what they were. I absolutely loved that exercise and that was a confirmation to me that I wanted to become a wine specialist! Even now, in Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester, we do weekly blind tastings of wine with the young sommeliers. When one does not know what the wine is beforehand, one is less tempted to judge and looks much further into details. It is the best thing to do!



DRY AGED BEEF, ARTICHOKE AND BONE MARROW



HALIBUT, OYSTER & SEAWEED



*"Different parts of a dish
and the structure of a wine
can walk hand in hand.
The level of acidity in wine is key
in the pairing with food."*

How is the art of food and wine pairing evolving?

I believe that today, chefs and sommeliers dare to think outside the box. Our senses can be surprised by produce we have never heard of before. It has always been about meeting the guest expectations, but we are in a time where we can combine ingredients or wines from different countries, or even continents, which allow us to exceed those expectations.

How much of a skill is required to properly pair food and wine? Can anyone learn to do it expertly, or do you need a natural flair?

If you really want something, you can achieve anything! A skill like pairing food and wine can definitely be learned. I believe that in every job, it is nice to have a mentor, or somebody who can help you understand things. And it's exactly the same thing with pairing food and wine.

How important is it to properly pair food and wine? Can it make or break a meal?

Wine and food can lift or fade each other's qualities. There are some important points to keep into consideration when pairing food & wine, like the level of alcohol in the wine, the spices used by the chef, the texture or richness of the sauce, the level of acidity in the food. It is very important to taste the food in order to get an understanding of its profile.

Appearance, Aroma, Bouquet, Taste, Aftertaste and Overall Impression are some of the factors considered for a good wine - Take us through the process of pairing wine with food...

There are a few questions you should ask yourself: What is the message behind the food? Which elements of the dish does the chef want to highlight? Is the dish light and refreshing or is it rich and intense?

Different parts of a dish and the structure of a wine can walk hand in hand. The level of acidity in wine is key in the pairing with food. It helps the wine cut through richness but it can also lift flavors of certain ingredients. More body in a wine is required to support richness. And the intensity of the aromas should be in line with the ones of the food. And, delicate produce work well with wines that have more elegance or lighter intensity.



CHAMPAGNE TROLLEY



Aromas can enhance the complexity of a wine but should not be predominant; a grape is a fruit after all and it should be displayed...


You work closely with Gérard Margeon... what was the experience and how did he influence you?

I met Gérard Margeon, Executive Wine Director of Ducasse Paris, for the first time when I was in Paris. He hosts weekly wine tastings for the young sommeliers of the company in the cellar of 'Aux Lyonnais' and I used to attend every week. It helped me to understand his philosophy and vision. This actually also developed my vocabulary and gave me confidence to recommend a wine to guests. I now do weekly sessions with my team here at Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester as I found it so helpful for myself.

In your opinion which are the best wines and wineries in the world?

Usually, I find that the best wines and wineries are where there is a lot of maintenance in the vineyard all year round and where little intervention needs to be made in the winery. It is the duty of the wine maker to give a wine the expression it deserves: the identity of the grape and of the region. Secondary aromas like oak, yeast or dairy, can enhance the complexity of a wine but should not be predominant; a grape is a fruit after all and it should be displayed as such. I am always looking for balance in the structure of a wine, and finesse!



A man in a grey suit, white shirt, and brown tie is pouring red wine from a dark bottle into a glass. He is looking down at the glass with a focused expression. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a window.

"Anybody who has a passion for wine can become a qualified sommelier"

Can it be that a wine which is rated a gold medal winner in one competition can do badly in another competition?

It is possible but I believe the chances are very small. Wine judges are very experienced sommeliers. And as the mark is given by a panel, the score is already an average. It is very important that all aspects of a wine are discussed before the actual award is given.

What does it take to become a qualified Sommelier?

Anybody who has a passion for wine can become a qualified sommelier. There are so many titles and diplomas these days and you can get your training in any place that allows you to connect with wine. Surround yourself with the right people, be eager to learn and most important: taste wine!

Your passion to taste, learn and especially to share your expertise on wine tasting continues to grow and evolve, and as - What keeps you motivated at this point in your career?

There are 2 main reasons. The first is factual as when in the restaurant we present wine to our guests, we need to explain its characteristics. It is important to transmit our passion while doing this and it often creates a genuine interest. I love it when guests ask me questions about wine! The second is that I also have the pleasure to educate colleagues that are young and passionate and to see them grow is a big motivation!