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Unfiltered: Ruben Desport, Alain Ducasse at the Dorchester

Hailing from Belgium, Desport oversees the list at three-Michelin-starred fine dining institution Alain Ducasse at the Dorchester. Desport commands a 1,000-strong list of mostly French wines, paying particular attention to pairings, created with executive chef Jean-Philippe Blondet. Desport's first foray into wine began as an intern in Le Louis XV in Monaco with Ducasse Paris at the age of 19. Setting the tone for his future career path, in 2010 he moved to London, taking up the role of commis sommelier at Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester. Two years later he left the Ducasse fold (briefly), and relocated to Paris, working at the vertiginous Le Jules Verne, the restaurant located on the Eiffel Tower. But the Ducasse empire was never far from his heart. During his two years atop the Tower, Desport assisted in numerous Ducasse Paris restaurants, including Aux Lyonnais, Benoit, and the fish restaurant, Rech. Keen to progress his career, in 2014 Desport returned to The Dorchester, and London, this time as head sommelier for the newly refurbished The Grill at The Dorchester, where he worked to create a 600-bin wine list. In August 2016, Desport came full circle, re-joining the team at Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester as assistant sommelier. Within two years, he was promoted to head sommelier and now leads a team that share his aim of delivering tailor-made, memorable service.



What or who inspired you to become a sommelier?

The moment I always credit to being the point where my interest in wine really stemmed from was while I was in catering school. For one hour per week we studied wine and this was where I found myself paying the most attention. One exercise involved 20 small samples of herbs and liquors, and we had to guess what each one was using only our sense of smell. I was hooked from that moment! Looking back at this experience, I would say that now winemakers are a great inspiration for me, and in particular all their work in the vineyards to obtain a wine. Each bottle tells a story and represents somebody's philosophy; it speaks about a specific region or grape variety and has its own identity, which our senses help uncover. It is almost like having nature in a glass if you consider the entire process it takes to create it.

What's your favourite part of the job?

As much as I love wine, what motivates me every day is the service we offer at Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester. I believe that what we do is very special, and I am very happy to share our knowledge and passion with our guests and provide them with that unique experience, every single day.

What's the biggest misconception about the role of a sommelier?

The biggest misconception is that a sommelier knows everything about wine. We know a lot about it, but I don't believe that we know everything. Our job is very demanding and requires us to do a lot of research and self-study, continuously learning. There are so many wine producing countries and spirits in the world and as a sommelier there is still so much to explore.

What's your go-to drink at the end of a long day?

I give my mind the perfect break with a Bourbon Old Fashioned. I indulge in the savoury and citrus notes of this short drink cocktail!

What's your most embarrassing front-of-house moment?

When I had just arrived in London, quite a few years back now, I offered an aperitif to a table and was asked for a 'G&T'. I had no idea what it was!

If you could give your younger self advice when starting out as a somm, what would it be?

Above all, a good sommelier is one that knows his cellar well. Everything else is secondary. I read many books and studied about the different geographies and beverage production methods all over the world, but I would still advise my younger self to look into more specialised literature, learning in depth about specific regions of France such as Burgundy for instance. The wine list in Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester is comprised of largely French wines, so having this specific knowledge is beneficial. On the other hand, my general knowledge on the wider world of wines gained in my younger years has certainly proven useful.

What bottle sparked your love of wine?

Without hesitation, 2001 Charmes-Chambertin, Armand Rousseau. I had been in the business for some time, but I tasted this Pinot Noir from Burgundy when I just started understanding wine. Up until then, I had never experienced anything with such harmony. All the different elements of the wine were in line and it had extraordinary finesse. I believe I opened that bottle at the exact right maturity.

What to date has been your most memorable wine experience?

Some time ago, one of our guests made a last minute booking to celebrate his daughter's birthday at the restaurant for dinner. Upon making the reservation, he wondered if we had any wine on the list from her birth year. We did not. So, on the same day, I had to source a few wines from that exact vintage in London. This is pretty much impossible if you want to get the wines on time! However, one of our suppliers went the extra mile, and delivered three references by courier just before the arrival of the guests! A very nerve-wracking moment, but one I will never forget!

Which customer habit annoys you the most?

A guest topping up their own water glass. This habit is not really annoying, but rather reminds me of my time in training as a young sommelier. Back then, if a guest served themselves water, it meant that I was lagging behind and not being on top of my duties. Now though, I have some guests who prefer to serve themselves, which I have come to accept, but it does still leave me with an odd feeling when it happens.

Who is your inspiration in the gastronomic world?

I am convinced that the basics of good food and wine come with responsible sourcing and production. With my passion for both subjects, it is very inspiring to hear Alain Ducasse speak about his restaurants and philosophy. The origins of a product play a very big part throughout his cuisine, using only the most seasonal ingredients from producers that share his same values. Another chef whose cook books I have about three of is José Pizarro, as Spanish cuisine is something I am very fond of and enjoy making at home.

What's your ultimate food and wine pairing?

It's as simple as a cold seafood platter with extra-brut Champagne. Growing up by the seaside, I have always enjoyed fish and seafood. The flavours are very delicate and refreshing. I just can't get enough!

Where would your fantasy vineyard be?

I have a soft spot for Tuscan red wines, and I like in particular the structure and aromatic profile of the Sangiovese grape. So Tuscany would be the right place for my fantasy vineyard. But besides the wine, there is also a lot of history, amazing food and beautiful landscapes dotted along by the iconic cypress trees. I just love them!

If you weren't a sommelier, what would you be doing and why?

I am very intrigued by the fluctuations of currencies. I would be cracking the code of the charts with a technical approach and invest my money in the biggest markets in the world. I always liked maths or playing Sudoku.

Which wine (grape/style) do you find it impossible to get along with?

Full bodied red or white wines that are marked by winemaking. Some wines have too much oak or have had too much skin contact. It is paramount to find the right balance. For example, oak should enhance a wine's texture or flavour but should not dominate it.

Who is the most memorable customer you've ever served and why?

It would be my mother. She came to the restaurant on my birthday as a surprise. I had left Belgium and I decided to dedicate my life to wine in London. I had already invested a lot of my time in the restaurant so I was very happy to be able to look after my family and show what we do on a daily basis. I was still a junior sommelier but already very proud.

What makes you most proud to be a sommelier working in London?

We have a young team here at Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester, but what makes this restaurant unique is that everybody is here for the same purpose. I find myself surrounded by very talented and ambitious people with great careers ahead. I feel the team spirit every day and it's very motivating.

What's on your wine bucket list?

Meeting Gianfranco Soldera at his estate in Montalcino. I admire his skill to produce wine the way he does. When tasting at Case Basse, you are not allowed to spit out any wine. Soldera is also obsessed with the right glasses. Tasting his wines with him at a restaurant can only be done if they have his specially designed glasses on hand.

Finally, what wine and paired plate would you pick from your list and why?

Halibut, oyster and seaweed. In Alain Ducasse at The Dorchester, it is served with slightly caramelised Roscoff onion and buckwheat so it is quite savoury, but at the same time, the oyster and seaweed add a different perspective and bring freshness and saltiness. This dish calls for a very nice 2013 Meursault, Les Grands Charrons, Domaine Michelot, which is a creamy, rich Chardonnay from Burgundy. The subtle hint of oak in this wine supports the savouriness of the onion and buckwheat, but also displays a great freshness and minerality on the palate that enhance the flavours of the oyster and seaweed.