

A man with short dark hair, a beard, and round glasses is looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a light-colored jacket with a dense floral pattern in shades of blue, orange, and green, over a white shirt and a dark bow tie. The background is dark and out of focus.

WINE LIST

CONFIDENTIAL

THE TOP 50: LONDON'S MOST POWERFUL SOMMELIERS

the drinks business



47. Ruben Desport Head sommelier

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. "I am convinced that the basics of good food and wine come from responsible sourcing and production," he says. "With my passion for both subjects, it is inspiring to hear Alain Ducasse speak about his restaurants and philosophy. The origins of a product play a very big part in his cuisine – using only seasonal ingredients from producers that share his values."

Today a key figure in London's on-

trade, Desport's first foray into wine began as an intern at Ducasse's Le Louis XV in Monaco when he was 19. Setting the tone for his future career path, in 2010 he moved to London, as 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 in the Eiffel Tower. But the Ducasse empire was never far from his heart.

During his two years in the Tower, Desport assisted in numerous Ducasse Paris restaurants, including Aux Lyonnais, Benoit, and the fish restaurant, Rech.

Of those early days, the diligent Desport only wishes he had studied

more. "Above all, a good sommelier is one who knows his cellar well. Everything else is secondary," he says. "I read many books and studied 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."

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With a head full of knowledge, and keen to progress in 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, rejoining 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 shares his aim of delivering tailor-made, memorable service.

"What makes this restaurant unique is that everybody is here for the same purpose," he says. "I feel the team spirit every day and it's very motivating."



What or who inspired you to become a sommelier?

My interest in wine stemmed from my time at catering school. For one hour a week we studied wine, and this was where I found myself paying the most attention. One exercise I recall involved 20 small samples of herbs and liquors, and we had to guess what each was using only our sense of smell. I was hooked from that moment. Winemakers are a great inspiration for me, particularly their work in the vineyard. Each bottle tells a story and represents a philosophy; it speaks about a specific region or grape variety, and has its own identity, which our senses uncover.

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.

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

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 a lot of study and continuous learning.

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

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

Which 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 elements of the wine were in line, and it had extraordinary finesse. I opened that bottle at the exact right maturity.

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

When I had just arrived in London I offered some guests an apéritif and was asked for a 'G&T'. I had no idea what it was.

Which customer habit annoys you the most?

A guest topping up their own water glass. This habit is not annoying, but reminds me of my time training as a young sommelier. Back then, if a guest served themselves water it meant that I was lagging behind and not on top of my duties. Some guests prefer to serve themselves, which I have come to accept, but it still leaves me with an odd feeling.

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

My mother. She came to the restaurant on my birthday as a surprise. I had left Belgium and had 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 a junior sommelier, but already very proud.

What's on your wine bucket list?

Meeting Gianfranco Soldera at his estate in Montalcino. I admire his skill of producing wine in the way he does. When tasting at the Case Basse estate, you are not allowed to spit out any wine.