

FOOD & WINE

Is This New York City's Greatest Wine List?



Eli Zabar & wine director Randall Restiano © *Quentin Bacon*

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New York is home to dozens of very good wine lists. There are massive, encyclopedia-length lists (Eleven Madison Park, Tribeca Grill); cool, funky wine lists (Reynard, Terroir, Roberta's); killer Italian lists (Del Posto, Babbo); extensive organic, biodynamic and "natural" lists (Contra, and Rouge Tomate, once it reopens), and even a terrific one devoted entirely to local New York-area wines (The Marshal; check it out). But there are very few that focus on older wines. At Dovetail, chef John Fraser's recently renovated (and still exceptional) Upper West Side restaurant, wine director Jaime Kaloustian has assembled a section of older California bottles that's a delight to graze through—a substantial step in an interesting direction. I had a 1997 Ojai Vineyard Roll Ranch Syrah there recently that was drinking gorgeously. CONTINUED....

But the most remarkable wine list I've come across devoted to older wines—or, to be more specific, wines that have had enough cellar age that they're drinking perfectly—has to be the list at Eli Zabar's restaurant Eli's Table.

This list is essentially heaven for wine geeks. And the reason is simple: For the past 15 years, Zabar has devoted his time to buying Burgundies, Champagnes and Piedmontese reds from top producers, then hiding them away in his cellar with the idea that one day he would open a restaurant and eventually sell them.

Zabar says, "This started in about 2000. I'd always loved Burgundy, but I had the idea restaurants weren't aging them long enough. So I decided I'd buy wines from the producers I respected and not sell them. Then it veered off and became more of a passion than anything else."

Part of that passion is exposing diners to wines that are truly ready to drink. Young Burgundies and Barolos often reveal very little of what makes them so complex and compelling later on. As Zabar says, drinking wine that has aged for several years in a cellar "is like taking an art history course. You come out understanding that what you liked going in wasn't really the whole story. The point is to introduce people to these wines—which is why our prices are extremely reasonable."

That's an understatement. On the 400-bottle list (culled from over 16,000 bottles in storage, all waiting their turn, and assembled by Zabar and wine director Randall Restiano), there are an incredible number of remarkable deals. These are a few: 2004 William Fèvre Grand Cru Bougros Chablis for \$140 (a wine that would run \$160 or more—for the current vintage—in most restaurants); 2001 Domaine Leflaive Puligny Montrachet Premier Cru Les Pucelles for \$250 (again, the current vintage would run substantially more than that); 2001 Pira Vigna Rionda Barolo for \$135. There are many, many more. And they've been stored perfectly, as well.

Are the wines cheap? Not really. Are they an absurd bargain for what they are? Definitely. As Zabar says, surprisingly cheerfully, "We're never going to make money on this." Moreover, because of the amount of wine he has amassed over the years, the list changes constantly (and is represented at his new Eli's Essentials Wine Bar, too).

Is it the best wine list in New York City? That depends on what you want, but I can't think of any I'd be happier returning to over and over again.