

Technology tackles wine's fear factor, fuels exploration and higher sales

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At Alain Ducasse's recently unveiled Adour restaurant in New York's upscale St. Regis Hotel, selecting a wine goes well beyond paging through a printed menu.

Adour guests can touch their way through a digital version of the wine list displayed on the surface of a four-seat, interactive "wine bar." The sommelier activates a set of sensors and projectors on the ceiling, which beam a flower icon onto the bar top. Patrons use the device to choose their wine by touching different iconic petals to learn about each pour's essentials, such as origin, producer and grape.

An extensive and award-winning wine list can be a feather in a restaurant's cap — and can be both intimidating and overwhelming for the guests. To break down the fear factor and boost wine sales, restaurateurs are turning to technology such as Adour's that they hope will make the wine experience accessible, educational and fun.

In the 10 years since chef-restaurateur Charlie Palmer's Aureole at Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas first deployed its tablet PC-based eWinebook, restaurateurs and technology solution providers have collaborated on all kinds of creative solutions to break down wine's intimidation factor, leveraging everything from iPods to bicycles to self-service wine dispensers in the process.

And while the landscape still is largely dominated by one-off solutions tailored to a specific restaurant, those operations using such solutions insist that they do impact wine sales and guest satisfaction, suggesting a larger market for wine-list technology.

Wine PowerBook

One of the most obvious applications is to transfer the wine list from bulky paper menus to computers that not only can inventory all of the wine but also include drill-down capability to sort and understand wines by characteristic, description, food pairing recommendation and tasting notes — even offering a link to each winery.

Guests of Adour still will be able to use a traditional wine list, but the interactive wine bar is designed for guests who want to learn about and discuss wine. The technology offered at the bar also is featured in the Vault Room, a semi-private dining area which seats up to 10 people around an 11-foot-long dining table.

Designed by David Rockwell, Adour, together with Potion Technology, poured \$250,000 into developing the interactive wine list. The solution includes proprietary software along with high-end projectors, computers, a Web-based database and a vision-sensing system.

The latest innovator in the digitization of wine lists, Adour joins earlier entrants such as Aureole's Las Vegas location, which famously features a four-story, white-lit wine tower staffed by wine "angels" suspended by wires. Aureole's tablet-enabled eWinebook has endured through \$500,000 in development costs and four iterations since its launch about a decade ago as a way to raise wines' prominence in the restaurant and break down guests' fears. A newly unveiled refresh of the eWinebook, now in use at four Charlie Palmer locations, features its first browser-based version; while the application feels local to the user, it's actually being served by a central host that has simplified backend administration such as additions and price changes and allowed the Charlie Palmer restaurant organization to maintain a single wine database.

Aureole's wine tablet long has featured an impressive range of functionality, from wine profiles to pairing suggestions, and enables guests to record their own notes about tastings and wines they'd like to try. User-friendliness has been a hallmark.

"We can do a million things with it, but the best functionality is to be able to zero in on a customer's area of interest," says Richard Femenella, chief financial officer for the Charlie Palmer restaurant organization. "It's a great PR tool, and customers really feel catered to."

With the latest refresh, created with the Charlie Palmer restaurant organization's third vendor partner, Logical Solutions of Rochester, N.Y., the company is looking to productize the eWinebook, offering the hosted solution to other restaurants. "It's not for everybody, but for restaurants with about 400 to 500 selections and above, we do highly recommend they use technology to enhance wine sales," Femenella says.

The Charlie Palmer restaurant organization also is using the central wine database to support its new concept, a side-by-side retail and restaurant in Dallas and Costa Mesa, Calif. The format will enable Internet sales as well as allowing the restaurants to offer wine at retail prices, with added corkage fees. The Dallas location opened first, and the combination of eWinebook technology and lower prices means 37 cents of every sales dollar comes from wine, with patrons moving to higher-end wines. At other Charlie Palmer restaurants, the eWinebook has boosted wine sales 2 percent to 5 percent.

"The big thing is, don't get lost in the technology," Femenella advises would-be wine list digitizers. "If you get too wrapped up in the technology, you can hurt the dining experience."

Darden Restaurants' Seasons 52 is another fan of hand-held wine tech. The seven-unit fresh-focused grill concept uses a portable POS solution from Aloha Technologies running on Symbol Technologies handhelds and an Amaranth Wireless WiFi network to

facilitate orders and payment. Darden has said it has a goal of replacing the Aloha software with the restaurant company's proprietary application by the end of May.

Wine education is a major focus at Seasons 52, where master sommelier and director of beverage and hospitality George Miliotes maintains 70 wines available by the glass in addition to an extensive by-the-bottle collection. Every shift starts with a tasting for servers, who compete to amass both wine knowledge and wine sales to win a trip with Miliotes to Napa Valley. Wine data, maintained by Miliotes, is downloaded daily to the hand-held database, where servers can reference it when seeking additional information for guests. "It's a learning and a refreshing device," Miliotes says.

"Nothing at the table sells wine better than a server that has tasted the wine, is knowledgeable about wine and is selling it," he emphasizes, viewing the hand-held as a support technology to that process.

Wine accounts for "an extraordinarily high percentage of sales" at Seasons 52, says Miliotes, who declined to share the cost of the application. "It's a trend-setting amount for the upper end of casual dining."

Marrying Wine and Tech

It takes a particular kind of restaurant atmosphere to finesse the romance of wine with the cool image of technology. Three-unit Massachusetts chain Skipper's uses internally developed Wine Wizard software chiefly in its Boston location. "It's a cool gadget for the techno-savvy guest that wants to scroll through it," says Beth Iannicelli, beverage director. "That's one of the reasons we've kept it only to Boston. There are a lot of tech industry people who have a comfort level with technology. It gets guests excited about the wine list."

A few times each evening, guests seek additional information about the wines Skipper's offers and are handed an Acer tablet computer and stylus. With those implements, they can view the list and follow direct links via the restaurant's WiFi connection to the Internet to reach winery sites.

The technology is even more prominent at the Grand Hyatt Dallas-Ft. Worth Airport. Servers in the airport's Grand Met restaurant place a Toshiba touchscreen mounted on a swivel stand right on a diner's table, allowing the diner to interact with the Virtual Menu, which features digital images of menu items along with ingredients and suggested wine pairings. By touching the screen, guests can navigate to a wine selector and see tasting notes and scores, reviews and suggestions based on previous' guests selections. The diners also have the ability to link to the winery site.

It took eight months to perfect the technology before its launch in July 2007, says Michael Stephens, general manager at Grand Hyatt DFW — but, he adds, the effort was well worth it: "I can tell you the average check increased by 15 percent from utilizing this technology," says Stephens. "If I pulled this away from the servers I would have a riot —

it's really helped with their gratuities." Guest satisfaction is also up: Grand Hyatt DFW rose to the top of Hyatt's food-and-beverage service rankings this year, thanks in part to the technology, Stephens says.

As a hotel physically attached to an airport, Grand Hyatt DFW's guest frequency metrics can be a tough issue, but Stephens says he is pleased with the word of mouth. In fact, the hotel leveraged that location to develop a traveler-friendly tech experience as well.

"We wanted to start doing wine tastings, but travelers are here at all different times and hours of the day," Stephens explains. So Grand Hyatt DFW pre-recorded podcasts about wine, as well as cheese and chocolate. For \$20 to \$25, a guest borrows a video iPod and a clean set of ear buds, receives a range of affordable wines and undertakes a guided tasting, lasting about 20 minutes. "Travelers are just loving this," says Stephens. Just putting such an offering on the menu isn't enough, however, he says. "You have to have an individual talk about it. We will sell you the experience."

Grand Hyatt DFW worked with AVT Communiqué and The Creative Effort, both divisions of Hospitality Partners LLC, to develop the technology, so there was no cost to the hotel. However, AVT now is marketing the system to others. While final costs will vary by installation, in general, a three-tablet PC Virtual Menu configuration would cost about \$15,000 to \$20,000, plus about \$6,000 for hardware, according to Bob Tomko, AVT's vice president. Restaurants also can choose to add Virtual Menu to a 42-inch kiosk, perhaps outside the restaurant's doors; that would run an additional \$10,000, he indicates. As for the iTaste program, a production and software for a 10-minute segment designed to play on an Apple iPod costs from \$7,000-\$10,000, with an additional hardware charge of \$200 per iPod.

Wine Vending

Guests can skip the middleman and the wine list at Naples Tomato in Naples, Fla., and serve themselves wine by the glass through a self-service wine dispenser. The Enomatic Wine Serving System keeps bottles fresh for weeks, allowing Naples to include high-end vintages, such as an \$800 Chateau d'Yquem.

"When that was just on the wine list, we may not sell a bottle in a whole year," says Jack Serfass, co-owner of Naples Tomato. "We now sell one a month."

Guests purchase a smart card for the Enomatic and load it with up to \$1,000. After inserting the card in the Enomatic, the guest can choose a 1-ounce, 3-ounce or 6-ounce pour, giving them a chance to try before they buy or experience wines that they may not otherwise wage by-the-bottle bets on.

"It's good for revenue and good for the guest experience," says Serfass, who has seen waste decline and wine sales rise by 25 percent to 35 percent in the 15 months since installation. About a quarter of the restaurant patrons come into the wine bar to try the

Enomatic and often buy for the table a bottle of what they tried. "I've gotten a tremendous amount of feedback," the operator explains.

Naples invested about \$85,000 in three Enomatic serving systems, becoming the first in Florida to do so. In other jurisdictions where ABC laws prevent self-service, restaurants have devised some creative ways to comply, such as limiting the quantity of wine that can be self-purchased in a given time period, implementing a one card-one patron policy. Others are working to get the laws altered, according to representatives of Enomatic distributor International Gourmet Group, which says a restaurant serving a range of medium wines would see its machines pay for themselves within six months.

The folks at Kansas City's Café Trio invested exactly nothing in their wine technology solution but still are building business with wine-loving customers through a unique tie-in. A local health club, Induro Cycling Studios in Kansas City, features theater-enhanced cycling, including a video wine tour, featuring footage of Napa Valley wineries courtesy of Connect18. Café Trio and Induro partner on wine tour events — guests cycle through the simulated tour at the Induro studio, then head over to the Café for a complimentary tasting and appetizers.

"It's worked out extremely well," says Greg Morey, marketing coordinator for the Kansas City restaurant. "It gave us a chance to talk to them about our restaurant and invite them to join our VIP club," as well as purchasing dinner at Café Trio. "It's the right demographic for us. We truly believe it's seven times easier to reach out to people who already have a connection with us than go out and grab new people," Morey says.

Fleming's Prime Steak House and Wine Bar undertook a similar project on its own; director of wine Marian Jansen Op de Haar visited many of the wineries on its progressive wine list with a Night Agency video crew to record interviews with winemakers and create a visual and informative tour of each location. Guests visit VineVoyage.com prior to their visit to Flemings, so they then can select and taste wines with an educated eye.

Keeping it Working

Like any data, computerized wine lists must be maintained as wines are added and subtracted from the list, prices change or new menu items require pairing. The need for updates varies by restaurant and how often its wine list or wine inventory changes. At Seasons 52, Miliotes works with distributors to ensure a six-month supply, keeping the need for alterations to a minimum.

Reliable infrastructure is also essential to creating and maintaining a quality experience.

Blue Fin, an upscale seafood restaurant in Times Square's W Hotel, tried a wireless handheld wine list a few years ago, but connectivity was iffy. "It was embarrassing," says Paulo Villela, sommelier and beverage director. "We weren't getting the right connection, depending on where you were, and it could take five minutes to download." Blue Fin

would be open to try a wireless wine list again — if performance were reliable and consistent, Villela says.

Similarly, some patrons' opening night reports on Adour's wine projection system called the interface finicky and a little frustrating.

Some restaurants choose to integrate their wine technology with point-of-sale or back-of-house systems to manage wine inventory and reconcile accounting. Others choose to keep the wine tech separate; the Charlie Palmer restaurant organization, for example, favors a hands-on style of wine inventory and intentionally runs its eWinebook as a stand-alone application. Grand Hyatt DFW also keeps its application solo, but others can choose to integrate Virtual Menu with POS and even place orders via the tablets.

For the Enomatic, "I liken it to a little POS system," says Serfass, which requires daily maintenance but also offers a wealth of business insight. "We can get reporting right down to the ounce: who drank what, what is on every card, even an alert if a bottle is low," Serfass says.

Wine-tech innovation continues. Atari and Chuck E. Cheese founder Nolan Bushnell's new uWink concept, with two units open and three more in construction, features touchscreen tabletops that allow customers to order and pay for their food right on the table's surface, as well as engage in custom entertainment. Offerings include animated wine education and wine flights enhanced by individual or group wine games, such as scoring wine characteristics against wine experts. "It increases the fun factor," says Robert Fowler, director of operations. "People who play the wine games drink more wine."

Similarly, Microsoft's Surface turns an ordinary tabletop into a vibrant, interactive surface and will be used in Harrah's Entertainment's Las Vegas properties, including Caesars Palace and the Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino, as well as some Sheraton Hotels & Resorts. The National Restaurant Association has labeled self-service technology as one of the industry's top trends to watch.

Most sommeliers and restaurateurs expect the printed wine list to continue as a mainstay of the restaurant experience. But most users of interactive wine technology maintain that a well-designed system can benefit everyone, helping guests enjoy and understand wine — and restaurants enjoy increased wine sales.