What a Chef Can Teach You About Wine

CHRIS SHEPHERD, AN F&W BEST NEW CHEF 2013 FROM UNDERBELLY IN HOUSTON, EXPLAINS WHY HE LOVES BANDOL, IS SO-SO ON CHAMPAGNE AND THINKS GRÜNER IS THE COOLEST WINE.

INTERVIEW BY RAY ISLE

Q. You were at culinary school when you first fell in love with wine, right?
A. Right. I'd go out and buy four Pinot Noirs, for example, from four different regions and try them all—this is Carneros, OK, and this is Santa Lucia Highlands, and this one, OK, this is what Sonoma Coast Pinots are like. I'd spend all my money on wine.

Q. Do you feel that working as a chef has given you special insight into wine?
A. Definitely. At one point I was working as a sous-chef at Brennan's [in Houston], and I'd roasted some cocoa nibs for a dish. I put them in the Cuisinart and ground them up, and when I got a whiff, I thought, Oh, my God. I grabbed my buddy, who was the somm there at the time, and I said, "This is it! When people say a wine smells like chocolate, this is it!" It was an eye-opening experience.

Q. Does it really matter what wine you use for cooking?
A. I don't worry too much about it. Need to deglaze a pan? Just grab the nearest open bottle and pour in some wine. You won't taste the subtle nuances that make one wine different from another, because you lose that in the cooking, but use a real wine. That sitting-on-the-grocery-store-shelf cooking wine?
No, no, no, no, no. I don't even know what that stuff is.

Q. Having grown up in Texas, I think of it as a Big Red kind of place—not just the classic soda, but wine, too: rich Cabernets, big Zinfandels, that sort of thing. Is that true?
A. It's funny, but I think Pinot has become the default red for most people, especially here in Houston. Pinot is easy.
Q. Easy how?
A. It’s never going to be overbearing; it’s going to be soft, sexy and delicious. But at the same time, I’d like to see people go outside that box and try a good Sangiovese or, especially if they’re getting a big piece of meat, a Bandol. It’s so rustic and funky, so earthy—absolutely fantastic with grilled meats, or pork belly.

Q. Do you mainly drink reds, then?
A. I drink more white wine than red—because it’s hot in Houston! I don’t want to drink reds while I’m sweating. Also, at Underbelly, I’m more into the ethnic side of things, and with Asian flavors—leafy green herbs, fish sauce, all that—I want crisp, acidic whites. Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Grüner Veltliner.

Q. You’ve said that Grüner is the ultimate “insider” wine—why?
A. Because if you order Grüner, you get street cred! Seriously. If you walk into a restaurant and look at the wine list and say, “This bottle of Grüner would be fantastic,” then you are automatically cool. The sommelier will look at you and then give you a little wink and the secret handshake.

UNDERBELLY CORKAGE FEE: $15

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<th>Most expensive bottle a customer ever brought in:</th>
<th>$2,000+</th>
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<td>CHEAPEST:</td>
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Q. Do you like sparkling wines?
A. Sure. I love Txakoli, from the Basque region in Spain. For me, that’s the stuff—very lightly effervescent, bright and vivid, with that tight acidity. Yeah, that makes me really happy.

Q. What about Champagne?
A. I’m not that big a Champagne person. I do like to decant it, though, which takes the bubbles out. Of course, winemakers see that and think you are such a jerk. But to me, that’s the truest expression of the wine. You’re stripping it down, seeing what actually got put into the bottle. I’ll drink a little bit of Champagne in a flute sometimes, but generally I’m going to put it in a white-wine glass and swirl it around like crazy, just shake the hell out of it.

Q. The Korean braised goat and dumplings at Underbelly has become your signature dish. But it uses gochujang (Korean red chile paste), which is very spicy, and also vinegar, a notorious wine-killer. What do you pour with it?
A. You mostly just don’t want a wine with high alcohol—that will increase the burn. But a Pinot Blanc or Pinot Gris that’s not too crazily acidic—just enough to stand up to the spice—is ideal. Like Heidi Schröck’s Weissburgunder, from Austria. I love her wines. They’re so clean, so variably correct.

Q. You have a very modest corkage fee at Underbelly. Do people bring in some incredible wines?
A. Recently, a customer brought in a bottle of ’82 Lafite, a bottle of ’82 Latour and a bottle of ’82 Margaux, and sent a glass back to me of each one. That was amazing. The Latour—wow. But it goes the other way, too. Our corkage fee is $15, and I’ll never understand when I see someone bring in a wine that I know at the store is $10. You’re going to pay me $15 to open your $10 wine? Really? And sometimes people just make weird choices. One guy, he brought in an Amarone and ordered the oysters mignonette. I said, “Maybe you’d like a glass of white first with those,” and he’s like, “Nope, we’re good.”

Q. Amarone and oysters? That has to be one of the worst pairings ever.
A. You have to accept that when you’re running a restaurant: People sometimes are dead set on doing what they’re doing. You see that train wreck coming and all you can do is turn your head.