



Benjamin Steakhouse,
52 East 41st Street, NYC

THE EVOLUTION OF THE STEAKHOUSE

At Wolfgang's, Ben & Jack's Steakhouse and Benjamin Steakhouse – all modern spin-offs of the legendary Peter Luger Steakhouse – the goal of their ever-evolving beverage programs is to turn sophisticated palates on to high quality, more obscure wines and spirits.

By Alia Akkam

When sitting down to a steak dinner, usually the beef is the main event. Surely, savoring each bite of a rib-eye with a glass of red wine is a natural inclination, but steakhouses don't typically conjure images of modern wine lists and bustling bars. While beverages may have played second fiddle to the meat served at legendary old steakhouses, a slew of new ones, led by a pack of Peter Luger alums, are proving that what you drink is just as important as what you eat.

Wolfgang Zwiener, with more than 40 years under his belt as head waiter at Peter Luger, clearly learned a few things about keeping customers happy and embracing their insights. When it came time to open his own steakhouse, Wolfgang's, in midtown Manhattan, Zwiener transferred those stellar service skills to all facets of the restaurant, including the wine list. Scott Mark Brown, the GM at the second Tribeca location, emphasizes that a





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successful wine list is an ever-evolving one. “If there’s something people are enthusiastic about, whether it’s from Chile or Washington state, we’ve got to have it,” he says. The wine list, one simple sheet, is not extensive, but customers have come to rely on it for quality California reds, comprising 80%-85% of the offerings. “Because of the way the list is slanted, it’s geared towards Cabernet Sauvignon. I’ve never seen so much,” adds Brown. A good Burgundy or Bordeaux is also within reach, and Brown is quick to point out the list is constantly growing.

Red Wine & Red Meat

At Ben & Jack’s Steakhouse, also in midtown, the restaurant created by two longtime waiters at Peter Luger, Harry Sinanaj, who handles purchasing for the restaurant, also puts together the wine list. “Ninety-five percent of people order red wine with their steak,” he says. “Steak and red wine just follow each other.” Even if more customers are likely to order a red over a white with their porterhouse, offering a variety of options is key. Sinanaj’s wine list, one he deems “short and smart,” doesn’t flood customers with choices. Diners can choose though from bottles like a 2001 St. Supery Cabernet Sauvignon to a 2004 Francis Coppola Red Label Zinfandel to a 2002 Australian Punters Corner Spartacus Reserve Shiraz. Having the freedom to select an affordable \$49 bottle, or one for \$3,000 when a decadent mood strikes, is one of the reasons the list at Ben & Jack’s is so well-received.

A few blocks away, at Benjamin Steakhouse in the Dylan Hotel, Victor Dedushaj, the GM who works very closely with owner Benjamin Prelvukaj to put together the wine list, says the leaders of the pack on his menu are high-end California

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Cabernets. “Diners come to have a high-quality steak and feel inclined to order one,” he says. But, his customers are also experimental. Especially in the summer, he notes the trend of Pinot Noir-sipping, as well as the return of the Merlot crowd. With the stigma from the movie *Sideways* finally over, guests are ordering bottles of Frog’s Leap and Duckhorn Merlot. Dedushaj, who’s worked in Italian restaurants for the last 12 years before joining Benjamin’s, also likes to extend the Italian offerings on the menu, which currently hover around 20 bottles. There are warhorses on the menu like Silver Oak that will never go out of fashion, but Dedushaj is thrilled to add new ones. “If a new wine doesn’t get great feedback, we take it off,” he adds matter-of-factly.

A Focus on Cocktails

For Prelvukaj, who still has great respect for his former employer, Peter Luger, he’s happy to make his own steakhouse distinctive by contemporizing the overall beverage program, focusing more attention on cocktails. “I

always thought that their wine list was quite limited, and that their bar and cocktail program needed a dose of modern elegance,” he says of his old restaurant. “I work very closely with Victor in adding both products of great renown, as well as new and exciting ones, that match the steakhouse expectations to our beverage program.” After the holidays, he plans to build up the mezzanine bar as a destination in its own right. They’re off to a good start. Evening happy hours at the restaurant are celebrated by half-off drinks.

“It’s mostly old-school, a martini crowd. Most people know what they want and it’s traditional — a Manhattan, an Old-Fashioned,” notes Dedushaj. In the after-dinner drinks category, he notices high-end tequila has had incredible pick-up, and equates it with Scotch now.

According to Sinanaj, most of the patrons at Ben & Jack’s start out at the bar, sipping bourbon and single malt Scotches in the cold weather, and vodka martinis and beer when it’s warm out. Around 4:30 p.m., Brown says Wolfgang’s starts filling up with traders who order plenty of martinis, single malt Scotches and draft beer.

The Best of the Best

At the end of the day, a steakhouse is still a classic experience and adventurous sipping habits are best indulged at other venues. The goal of these modern steakhouses is to turn sophisticated palates on to quality products that are more obscure. As Dedushaj says, “We have the best products of what will be most requested, like whisky and Scotch, because that’s what people drink. But, you might as well try Bulleit or Blanton’s bourbon and have a waiter or bartender introduce something new to make it a growing experience.” ■