

## Flipping the Script on “House Wine”

Long associated with anonymous, notoriously cheap pours, the term “house wine” has a history of bad connotations. But that’s changing. Carson Demmond on the collaborations that have led to a new wave of house wines.

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Walk into any restaurant in small-town Europe and order up a simple glass of red or white, and you'll get the "house wine." Usually, it's from a local producer that the owners have been buying from for years. In some cases—in an Austrian *heuriger*, to name one example—it's made by the people who run the place. It might come out of a shiner bottle or jug or a carafe. What it will almost always be is inexpensive, perfectly thirst quenching and of a level of quality that's moderate at worst. No one gets judged for ordering house wine. In fact, it's expected.

Not so for much of America's dining history. Here, asking for the "house chardonnay" has long been code for "I'll take the cheapest white wine you've got." What you could expect from such a request is industrial-scale crap or, at most, wine valued more for its consistency than for its characteristics—a by-the-glass equivalent of **well liquor**. That personal connection that's built into the Old World's house wine culture rarely entered the conversation, in many cases due to the long distances between our restaurants and wine regions, or the fact that many of the wines were company-designed rather than farmed and stewarded by an actual person.

Somewhere along the line, though, restaurateurs got smart about both the cost structures and quality quotients for house wine offerings. Those with a direct line to their supplier found opportunities to buy finished wine that didn't make a winery's final blend and would otherwise have been sold away in bulk. In return, the winery would print the restaurant's name or logo on the bottles. This ushered in the era of the "private label," a vanity phrase that always seemed to me unwittingly transparent, since the only thing unique about them was the packaging. Some were inarguably well-made wines, although if you weren't sold on the novelty of their exclusivity to the restaurant, just about any other option off the list was more enticing.

In the last ten years, the dialogue has shifted again. While chefs forged closer and closer relationships with the farms and purveyors they worked with, sommeliers also came to see the wineries and winemakers who shared a similar ethos as friends who deserved their mutual support. Many now work with winemakers to create proprietary wines for their restaurants that bear a resemblance to the old notion of a private label, but are the result of a genuine collaboration. A new name used to describe them—“custom cuvée”—hints at exactly that.

During his tenure at **Eleven Madison Park**, former wine director Dustin Wilson was looking for a sherry to pair with a particular dish on the restaurant’s ten-course tasting menu. A wine from progressive sherry bottlers **Equipo Navazos**, he thought, would be ideal. So he reached out to Jesús Barquín—the founder—to discuss a way to collaborate and feature the wine in a more prominent way. “I honestly expected him to say no,” says Wilson. “We went back and forth about the style, and it turns out they had access to a cask of manzanilla that fit the profile of what we were looking for exactly.”

While their La Bota de Manzanilla para Eleven Madison Park was being bottled and shipped, Wilson prepped his team by holding a series of sherry classes. When the wine arrived, they were well-versed, with a sense of ownership that incentivized them to sell it. “That’s where the success came from—having the story,” he says. “This wine was designed to go with this dish.”

New York City’s **The Meatball Shop** took staff involvement in their custom cuvée creation—theirs with the Guibert family of **Mas de Daumas Gassac** in France’s Languedoc—one big step further. The group held a contest: Whoever sold the most Moulin de Gassac Rosé on a per-guest average over a ten-week period last summer would join the chef and owner on a trip to Montpellier at the end of the year to taste the lots of wine and decide the final blend.



“Five of them came out here, and I allocated a day to doing the blend with them,” says winemaker Samuel Guibert. “It was fun and a little chaotic, and it really took the *whole* day because everyone had such strong opinions.” By trial and error, they worked through 20 different wines from estate plots in the Pays d’Hérault to achieve the base blend—a syrah-dominant wine bolstered with merlot and grenache. It launched on menus in all six locations of the fast-casual concept this spring.

Because of the artisan nature of the wineries involved, these proprietary cuvées aren’t exactly the cheapest options on the menu. At \$22 a glass, the pinot noir that **Evening Land Vineyards** produces for the **Altamarea Group**’s ten restaurants (and that wine director Hristo Zisovski blends) is sourced largely from Seven Springs Vineyard—a biodynamically farmed site considered by many to be Oregon’s finest. And it gets the technical know-how of Rajat Parr and Sashi Moorman, the duo behind the stunning pinots of **Domaine de la Côte**. Were it not for the friendly arrangement between wine professionals, that glass would probably cost a lot more.

So, one might wonder, what’s in it for the winery? The easy answer is that they get an upfront commitment from the restaurant to purchase the full lot of wine. But I suspect it goes deeper. In the case of the Eleven Madison Parks and the Daniel Boulud of the restaurant world, it affords them very visible positions on respected wine lists. In the case of restaurants like The Meatball Shop with multiple locations, it can be about visibility and positive association. If you’re only as good as the company you keep, creating a custom cuvée for a sommelier is an endorsement of that sommelier’s wine program or, perhaps more importantly, of the restaurant itself.

At San Francisco's **Frances**, the proprietary offerings are wines that longtime sommelier Paul Einbund worked on with friend and winemaker Marco Cappelli of **Miraflores** in El Dorado County. They come in keg format to keep their prices lower, and he serves them in carafes, charging \$1.80 per ounce. For his own restaurant, **The Morris**, the format will be the same, with the cuvées changing throughout the year based on the season and menu. First up, he has an Alto Adige-inspired blend of sauvignon blanc, pinot grigio and chardonnay and a red blend of barbera and cabernet. But it won't say as much on the wine list; Einbund has embraced the retro "house wine" nomenclature.

"I think of my house, which is my restaurant, as being rad," he says. "So the house wine should be equally as rad." Since guests are only paying per volume of consumption, it's in his best interest to make them interesting—and infinitely drinkable. "They've come to trust me to put up a good product," he says. "Even big-time wine people come in and order a house white while they decide on what to eat and drink."



### **Huertas | New York City**

East Village Basque restaurant, **Huertas**, features a custom cider from **Shacksbury** called “The Basque” on draft. It’s blended, says managing partner Nate Adler, “to have the best of both cider worlds: Spain and the Northeast.” That is, 50 percent Spanish and 50 percent Vermont apples, 10 percent foraged and 90 percent orchard fruit.

### **Nostrana | Portland**

**Nostrana** sommelier Michael Doherty has for the last two seasons worked with vintner Jay Somers of **J. Christopher** to blend a proprietary pinot noir from vineyards around the Eola-Amity Hills AVA in Oregon’s Willamette Valley. “Being an Italian restaurant, there are a lot of contemporary styles of pinot noir that don’t work with our cuisine,” says Doherty. “We wanted something with a cool mineral characteristic and a bunch of brightness, and we really nailed it.”

### **Restaurant Daniel | New York City**

The **Daniel Boulud restaurants** were the first in the U.S. to carry the Champagnes of **Pierre Paillard**, and for the last six years, they’ve poured their own version of the Bouzy grower’s non-vintage brut. The difference? The group’s beverage directors collectively determine the dosage level, tailoring the expression to what their clientele enjoys. “Our guests want a rounder style of Champagne—something that has mineral character but also texture,” says The Dinex Group head sommelier Raj Vaidya.

### **Think Food Group | Washington, DC**

José Andrés **Think Food Group** wine director Andy Myers partnered with winemaker **Rutger de Vink of RdV Vineyards** in Virginia to create José Cuvée. A merlot-dominant Bordeaux blend, it’s currently poured at America Eats Tavern out of 18-liter Melchior bottles from a custom serving device. Myers has also planned a limited bottling with the winery to feature in the group’s Miami, L.A. and Las Vegas restaurants.

### **The Meatball Shop | New York City**

The famed Languedoc producer Mas de Daumas Gassac’s only collaborative project is a group effort between winemaker Samuel Guibert and a handful of the restaurants’ employees. The 2015 Moulin de Gassac Meatball Shop Red is currently on offer in all of the group’s six locations, and the 2016 is set for blending at the end of November. — **P**