

TRAVEL MONACO

The diplomat sommelier

It takes wisdom to be the custodian of a cellar of treasures, writes **Kendall Hill**.



As chief sommelier at Monaco's storied Hôtel de Paris, Patrice Franck is not only custodian of 400,000 wines and one of the world's largest private cellars but a lay psychologist, too.

"There's a lot of psychology in our job. You know when the clients are talking to you whether it's only for fun – they just want to spend the money – or whether they are connoisseurs," says Franck, who is also president of the Monaco Sommeliers' Association.

The hotel cellar, carved into the Monte Carlo bedrock in 1864 and expanded a decade later by a team of 100 tradespeople to its present 1500 square metres, harbours some of the finest wines ever produced.

But just because you have the money to buy a rare drop does not mean Franck will sell it to you.

It's a delicate art, steering diners away from a bottle of wine they don't deserve. Franck prefers his treasures to be drunk only by those who will appreciate them.

"I can't say no to a client, but I try to orient them to another wine if I understand it's only for show," he says tactfully. "Sometimes it's not so easy."

Franck is one of 50 sommeliers working in the dozens of outlets owned by the Société des Bains de Mer, Monaco's hospitality giant that also operates the Monte Carlo Casino, the Café de Paris, Hôtel Hermitage and Monte-Carlo Beach Hotel. The cellar supplies all the venues, selling more than 350,000 bottles of wine every year.

It is Franck's task to ensure the cellar remains full, and phenomenal.

"When I arrived here more than 17 years ago, I received the patrimony of wine and I need to transmit the same to my successor."

That patrimony extends to some truly exceptional vintages, including a Château d'Yquem 1890 that Franck last tasted in 2003 when the bottles were recorked. "It looks really, really young, there's a good acidity and it's more than 120 years old," he says.

Their oldest wine actually predates the cellar by almost 30 years; it's an 1835 Château Bel Air-Marquis d'Aligre. But the 1890 d'Yquem is the oldest drinkable wine.

The cellar also has a small stash (a double magnum, a magnum and 10 bottles) of Mouton Rothschild 1945, notable because it was the only great vintage of World War II. The '45 is also notable because it was made by women – the men were still at war. Each of the bottles is marked with a special V label, for victory.

"This is a crazy bottle of wine. There's no price for this now," Franck says. "If we open a bottle then the price



immediately increases."

The Petrus 1945 is a similarly great vintage, and available to diners at Alain Ducasse's three-starred Le Louis XV restaurant for €25,000 (\$39,000) a bottle. It is, says Franck, "a wine of legend".

Interestingly, the hotel's cellars were closed during the war and a fake wall of empty bottles, seven deep, was constructed to hide the good stuff – about 20,000 bottles of it – from occupying Nazis. The strategy succeeded and in 1945, the cellars were ceremoniously reopened by Sir Winston Churchill, one of the hotel's most famous guests. He often wintered there with his pet parakeet.

Wines from Bordeaux account for about 70 per cent of the cellar's holdings. The hotel only buys direct from the châteaux of France's most celebrated wine region, "so we can be guaranteed the quality". Auctions are a no-no because there's no knowing where the wine has been or how far it has travelled.

Burgundy, the Côtes de Provence and Champagne are the cellar's other strong suits. Franck says the Hôtel de Paris is the top seller of "proper" champagne in Europe. The Moulin Rouge in Paris sells more by volume, he concedes, but it is cheap stuff included in the ticket price.

Franck's current favourite champagne is the Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blancs 2004. "It's the wine I can drink now. Cristal is amazing

but on the market now is the 2009 vintage, and it is too young. To be sure champagnes like that are of the optimum taste and quality, you need to wait 10 to 12 years."

In total, French wines make up 99 per cent of the hotel's vast inventory. "You are in Monaco, and we receive guests from all over the world. When they come here they want to find wines from France and Europe," Franck explains.

There is a "special" clientele in Monaco, he says, who know their wine and can spend money on it. "They are very demanding but they can also pay for that."

Just a fortnight before he spoke to *Life & Leisure*, Franck opened two bottles of Petrus 2000 for a couple dining in Le Grill, at a cost of €26,000. "There is always some situation like that, because this is Monaco," he smiles.

Living the high life doesn't mean all his clients are high class. Franck recalls an American couple who insisted on having a shot of bourbon after each glass of wine. "Luckily the wine was not special. You can't taste anything after bourbon."

A man in his position can only serve and observe. "If the client would like to put an ice cube in a bottle of Petrus, it's not my preference – but if they really want to they can." **L&L**

The writer travelled as a guest of the Monaco Government Tourist Bureau and Qatar Airways.

Above: Patrice Franck, chief sommelier at Monaco's Hôtel de Paris, is in charge of 400,000 wines. Top: a bottle of the priceless Mouton Rothschild 1945.

Philip Culazzo in the doorway of his L'Orangerie shop.

Bitter taste of success

In springtime, the bitter orange trees lining Monaco's steep and winding streets perfume the air with neroli and the principality feels just a little more charmed than usual. But until recently the fruit of these trees, about 10 to 15 tonnes a year, simply fell to the ground. Most of it ended up in the municipal incinerator.

Your typical Monégasque millionaire is probably not the type to make marmalade. But alcohol has proved to be a different story. A few years ago, Irish-Italian resident Philip Culazzo wondered if he could make something a little different from Monte Carlo's fallen fruit.

First, he had to seek permission – the 600 or so orange trees lining Avenue Grande-Bretagne and other prominent boulevards are officially owned by the ruling Grimaldi family. The next step was to engage an oenologist and experiment with one tonne of fruit.

Finally, Culazzo presented the resulting orange liqueur aperitif, L'Orangerie, to the government for approval. "They were very much on board from that point."

Last December, Culazzo produced his first batch of 15,000 bottles of L'Orangerie from a tiny, three-level atelier in La Condamine. In the process, he inaugurated Monaco's first new distillery in 150 years.

L'Orangerie, which can be used similarly to Aperol or Campari, comprises orange peel, some sugar for balance, water and alcohol, with no artificial colours or flavours. Culazzo recommends drinking it over ice or as a "Monaco spritz", with prosecco and orange zest, or a strawberry slice.

Naturally, he gave the very first bottle to his chief benefactor, Prince Albert of Monaco. His Serene Highness has since visited Culazzo at the store and given L'Orangerie his blessing. **KENDALL HILL**



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private dining room," says someone who routinely books them for executives at one of the big four banks. "It should be called semi-private, perhaps."

Her advice is to visit the restaurant in advance to scope the room.

6. Will your venue's space be perfect for my hen's party/80th birthday party/wedding/corporate talkfest/serious wine dinner/21st?

See Rule 4, above. While venues make much of their catering versatility, it can help to match the occasion to the style – and price point – of the host restaurant. "We're seeing lots of little groups of 10 for weddings," says Carlo Grossi of Melbourne's upscale Grossi Florentino. "It's a real trend. Rather than do the big wedding, they're doing a quiet dinner for family and bridal party and spending the money they've saved on a house deposit."

The restaurant's Wynn Room also attracts the big-spending elite who require a high level of personalised service. "We've

had rock bands request private changing rooms so they can wear different clothes at different stages of the meal," says Grossi.

At Wildflower in Perth's Como Treasury, it's C-Suite executives who make up most of the private dining clientele, says Como's Michelle Leong.

Divorce party? Mallory Wall again: "The estranged couple threw a party in our PDR so, as they said in a statement, they could both claim Di Stasio in the (amicable) settlement. It was a joyful night."

Raucous hen's party with penis straws? Look to an affordable good-times venue that won't mind the cacophony.

7. Can I ask you another 10 questions?

No, seriously. Particularly if your event is formal and structured – a wedding, a high-end wine dinner – you will need to drill down even further with questions such as these, says Lisa Hasen of restaurant reservations platform OpenTable: How many staff per head? Does that include a bartender? Can you give me a running sheet with the order of events? Can you guarantee we will have mains by, say, 9pm? (At Melbourne's The Smith, for instance, the upstairs private rooms have a dedicated



kitchen, so orders aren't competing with those in the main dining room). What about music? Do we have control over the sound levels? And the A/C? Is there "cakeage"? If the party is outside, what's the contingency plan in case of bad weather? If it's a wine dinner, can we BYO? And do you have suitable glassware (for example, Riedel)?

Oh, and maybe one last thing. What's your potato-allocation policy? **L&L**

The private dining room at Grossi Florentino in Melbourne.

Our pick

Victoria Café di Stasio; The Smith; Grossi Florentino; Noosa; Fellini Ristorante e Bar; Flower Drum; Lake House, Daylesford; Ryne; Pure South Dining; Kismé; Estelle Bistro; Dinner by Heston Blumenthal; Annam

NSW The Gantry; Bennelong; Alpha Restaurant; Bentley Restaurant + Bar; Est.; Rockpool Bar & Grill; Long Chim; 12-Micron; Biota Dining, Bowral; Muse Dining, Hunter Valley

Queensland Rumba Wine Bar (at Sails Restaurant, Noosa Beach); Madame Wu;

Stokehouse Q; Noosa Ibento (at Wasabi), Noosa; Fellini Ristorante e Bar; Noosa Beach House Peter Kuruvita

Western Australia Wildflower; Wills Domain; Must Winebar; Rockpool Bar & Grill

South Australia Chianti; St Hugo, Barossa Valley; Sean's Kitchen; Magill Estate Kitchen

Tasmania Me Wah; Black Cow Bistro, Launceston; Agrarian Kitchen Eatery; Landscape Restaurant & Grill