

Selling Big Wines

Paolo Barbieri knows how to sell \$15,000 bottles of 1982 Pétrus, but prefers \$80 bottles in this economy

story and photo by Fred Minnick

When Paolo Barbieri received a phone call to interview for the Wine Director position at the soon-to-be-opened Le Cirque Las Vegas, he couldn't believe it. At the time, the humble Barbieri, a native of Rome, was the General Manager and Sommelier for Prima Ristorante in the San Francisco Bay Area and was on the short-list for the Vegas position.

Five interviews later, Mario Maccioni, son of the legendary Sirio Maccioni, offered Barbieri the job. He accepted and began a journey that would lead him to become a Master Sommelier and one of the most-respected somms in the country.



Wine Director Paolo Barbieri in his cellar at Alex at Wynn Las Vegas.

After serving multi-thousand dollar bottles to Michael Jackson, Don Rickles, Elizabeth Taylor and countless other celebrities, Barbieri built a reputation as an incredible salesman. Today, he is the Wine Director for the Wynn Las Vegas's Mobil Five-Star restaurant Alex and makes his own wine through the Barbieri Wine Company label in Santa Barbara County. The TASTING PANEL caught up with Barbieri to talk wine and Alex.

THE TASTING PANEL: A lot of Master Sommeliers work office jobs, but you actually visit tables. How much time do you spend with the customer?

Paolo Barbieri: I'm on the floor every day, five days a week. It's not for me to sit in an office. Some people like to have a more powerful job, where they're on a multi-million-dollar program with many restaurants. And some people like to be on the floor to do the sales, which, to me, is more exciting.

TP: What are your consumers like at Alex?

PB: We have all kinds, but a lot of collectors come in. They call me two weeks in advance and we talk about wine lists.

TP: What seem to be the best-selling wines?

PB: The California Cabernet is king. I run anywhere between 1,200 and 1,400 wines on the wine list, and this is a high-end restaurant. We have a table station menu with the wine pairing, which is \$350 a person.

TP: If California Cabernet is king, is it a challenge to sell Old World wines?

PB: Not really. I think if you know what you're talking about and the customer trusts you, then you can make a sale.

TP: What's a region that you have found that does not sell well?

PB: For me, Alsace doesn't sell well, although I present it very well. But for Riesling, dry Riesling is a little bit more difficult to sell. You can't concentrate on one region only, because then you have one region that sells, and another one doesn't move. You have all this money stuck there. Creating a wine museum, that's easy. A wine list that has 25 \$3,000 wines that do not move—what good is it to you? It's not.

TP: You have \$15,000 bottles on your menu. How has the economy affected your program?

PB: You have to buy wine that's more affordable. You have to look at the money that you're allowed to spend and spend it right. I'd rather buy a case of wine for \$1,000 than buy a bottle for a \$1,000, because I can make more money with those. An \$80 wine moves faster. ■■