



Bottle bank

To learn how a successful wine cellar can generate excitement and revenue, Phin Foster meets **Toni Neumeister** of Crystal Cruises and **Paul Shea** of Carnival.

Benjamin Franklin may have believed that 'wine makes daily living easier, less hurried, with fewer tensions and more tolerance', but he never had to stock a cruise line's cellar.

Wine consumption in the US has increased year on year for the last 14. Americans drank 3.2 gallons per person in 2007, compared to 2.81 gallons in 2005 and 2.46 in 2000. This growth shows no signs of abating and is mirrored in northern Europe. While casual drinkers might have previously been happy to make the simple choice between white and red, the masses have become more discerning. Food and beverage directors are under unprecedented pressure to provide a cellar that is

more nuanced, varied in scope and reflective of the latest trends.

This is not only a challenge; it is also a great opportunity. Toni Neumeister, vice-president of food and beverage at Crystal Cruises, has seen wine takings triple since arriving in 1995. 'In the old days, guests would take scotch with their meal,' chuckles the affable Austrian. 'Not anymore, and we must keep on top of a rapidly expanding market.'

Paul Shea agrees. Carnival's director of bar operations believes that the time for holding the guest's hand is over, as reflected in the transformation of the cruise line's wine list. The 'Progressive List', grouping labels into categories based upon sweetness and body,

regardless of price point or region, was replaced last year, with bottles listed solely by varietal and cost.

'We're taking a more direct approach,' Shea explains. 'People now know what they like and there's no longer the need to put a Vouvray in the same category as a Beringer White Zinfandel; guests have the confidence to take the next step for themselves.'

The work that goes into compiling a wine list in the first place is staggering. Alongside senior vice-president of hotel operations Natko Nincevic and vice president of food and beverage Cyrus Marfatia, Shea will taste upwards of 600 wines a year. With management staff also welcome to attend, tastings can involve 30 wines per seating. 'I see it as a bonding session,' he says, 'but I can assure you that we sip and spit.'

The tasting comes on the back of submission sheets being sent out to all major suppliers. They are asked not only to consider the Carnival demographic, but also to address the latest industry trends. 'We need to reflect where things are moving and these people have major departments for evaluating that,' Shea explains. 'Where are the hot regions? What's performing landside? Cruise lines can often be a little behind, but they need to catch up fast.'

Crystal, with a far more international itinerary, is proactive in forging local links with vineyards and suppliers. 'We're very on the ball when it comes to purchasing local wines,' says Neumeister. 'It's something we really emphasise. Guests not

only want the cultural experience of seeing new places; they're after the culinary element as well. When you're sailing in the Mediterranean or Australia, wine is an integral part of that.'

With around 400 different labels available, Crystal takes this seriously. It employs fully certified sommeliers across all its restaurants, the only operator to do so, who play a key role in deciding what

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Toni Neumeister

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A well stocked cellar and experienced sommeliers can increase onboard revenue.

makes the final cut. Nowhere is this more in evidence than with the company's own proprietary label, C Wines, launched in 2003. 'They're made by several different vineyards,' Neumeister says, 'but it goes beyond taking somebody else's bottle and adding our branding. I fly out to Napa, Sonoma and Monterey with my head sommeliers at the beginning of each year and undertake a series of tastings. They know better than anyone what our guests want and can convey that to the growers. We do planting sessions as well; getting people involved in the entire process.'

Carnival is also a great believer in introducing its senior servers to *le terroir*. While employing trained sommeliers for its high-end 'supper clubs', responsibility for wine predominantly falls on the shoulders of maitre d's and hostesses. They are taken out to the Napa Valley for training, and meet wine makers and vineyard managers. 'We have a very international crew and their knowledge of American wine can be quite limited,' Shea explains. 'Generating an understanding and real buzz is something they can take back and

convey to the crew and guests on board. Being able to tell a story or convey a narrative enhances the overall experience.'

Both men are in agreement on the importance of running an extensive wine by glass programme. Advances in technology and a wider array of tastes have increased the scope afforded to operators and have made the undertaking far more profitable. It was originally a complaint by one of his head sommeliers that led to Neumeister expanding the variety on offer. 'He was frustrated that guests wanted to drink high-end vintages but were not willing to purchase an entire bottle,' he explains. 'Now every restaurant has at least ten varieties on offer, the bars 15 and the main dining room 20. And it's adventurous: there's high-end Bordeaux at \$20 a glass. Giving guests a taste encourages them to spend.'

Shea has introduced up to 30 wines by glass, and also runs a scheme where unfinished bottles can be sealed, tagged and served to their owner the following day at no extra cost. 'We use a great preservation system, Le Verre de Vin,

which allows us to accommodate more guests' tastes,' he says. 'We got through over 200,000 cases of wine last year and, by offering alternative means of serving, you do increase revenue.'

This accounts for Shea introducing the same wine list across all onboard restaurants, with additional, high-end labels available in the supper clubs. Crystal, on the other hand, offers bespoke lists tailored for individual cuisines. Sommeliers make this a more reasonable ambition, although Neumeister admits that it can be cause for lively debate. 'When it comes to wine,' he tells me, 'personal opinion is everything. My Italian sommelier is a walking Italian wine lexicon; if I ask him to recommend a new label to bring in, he'll give me 20. It's the same with Asian,

'We got through over 200,000 cases of wine last year.'

Paul Shea

Austrian and New World specialists. You have to compromise, although they all make a very good argument.'

And they make money. Neumeister insists that sommeliers greatly increase revenue. 'Their knowledge creates excitement,' he explains. 'That excitement encourages people to spend a little more than they might otherwise. There's nothing more exciting than an expert.'

Crystal's vice-president of food and beverage doesn't cast himself in that company quite yet, but does have an eye on where he might look next. 'I'm still learning,' he chuckles, 'but there are surprising regions coming onto the map that I'm paying close attention to. Canada is producing some really interesting sweet wines right now, as well as lovely whites. I'm hearing positive reports on Indian dry whites. Everything is so international now, and heightening that sense of place for our guests is a great opportunity.'

Staying abreast of the trends is a full-time job in itself. However, with enthusiasm that contagious, perhaps Benjamin Franklin was onto something after all. **wc**