



# How to Boost Your Average Wine Check

Keeping Tabs on New York City's Celebrity-Chef Restaurants

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In 2009, I began my dissertation for the Master of Wine program. The official title of my proposed thesis was “Wine Check Averages: Does wine-program design impact how much guests spend on their wine experience at dinner in celebrity-chef restaurants in New York City?” At the time, I was the corporate beverage director for Culinary Concepts by Jean-Georges [Vongerichten], so it’s probably not surprising that I focused on fine dining; in fact, MW candidates are advised to choose a subject they already know through and through, so that they can build on it and, yes, master it.

I probably spent more than 350 hours on that paper; in the process, I learned a lot about what New York City sommeliers think of their positions, their programs, and the wine-buying habits of their guests, as well as how these habits are reflected in restaurant tabs.

*Mandarin Oriental Hotel dining room overlooking Central Park in New York City.*

## Digging into the Subject

A review of the scholarly literature revealed that little research had been conducted on my topic (thereby confirming its “originality,” another criterion of the Institute of Masters of Wine). So I set forth, first, to assess the broad range of features that constitute a wine program and, second, to determine how a particular program design may add or detract from sales. As I defined it, a “wine experience” involved the consumption of still, sparkling, sweet, and fortified wines (except vermouth) in any format: bottle, carafe, glass, squirt gun (well, probably not the latter, but you get the idea).

I chose the narrow category of celebrity-chef restaurants based on their reputation among consumers for gastronomic and service excellence, often involving extensive wine programs. Although the purchasing motivations of guests may vary from restaurant to restaurant, meals at celebrity-chef destinations are often fueled by anticipation and the intent to splurge: “Finally, we got into Per Se!” Still, the recession loomed large during my study period, and sales were critical to survival even for these high-end establishments.

Though I initially considered four other cities, I chose to zero in on the established fine-dining capital of the nation, New York City—which, according to Zagat, had between twice and three times as many celebrity-chef restaurants as any of the other candidate cities. To make sure I compared apples to apples, I included only restaurants—123 in all—with total dinner-check averages of more than \$40, again per Zagat. I further streamlined the sample by considering only the main dining areas, not bars or lounges.

## Designing the Survey

In developing my interview questionnaire, I first surveyed the academic literature to determine the most-investigated wine-list metrics. I then reached out to a number of well-established and highly respected sommeliers outside New York City for their thoughts on the key features of a high-end wine program. The result was a list of 37 questions, including:

- What is the average age of your client base?
- What is the most effective way to highlight alternative formats on your list (in a separate section, within the list of 750-ml bottles, or both)?
- What are 10 wines or wine styles every list

should have to increase wine-check averages?

- How much more or less do you estimate guests spend, on average, when the wine list changes frequently?
- What is the optimal number of wines by the glass that should be offered to increase the wine-check average?
- Does listing wine by variety encourage guests to spend more?

I was able to set up interviews with 19 wine directors, representing 15.4% of the city’s 123 celebrity-chef restaurants—a sufficiently robust sample by academic standards. Interviewees averaged 9.6 years in their current positions; except for two superstars who had been on the job for less than two years, all had spent at least eight years in the trenches. The enthusiasm and determination with which my respondents attacked the list of questions was encouraging.

## Interview Results

The most interesting interview findings came from two ranking questions.

In conjunction with other responses, the results of the first question (illustrated in the graph at the top of p. 85) allowed me to draw two hypotheses regarding wine checks:

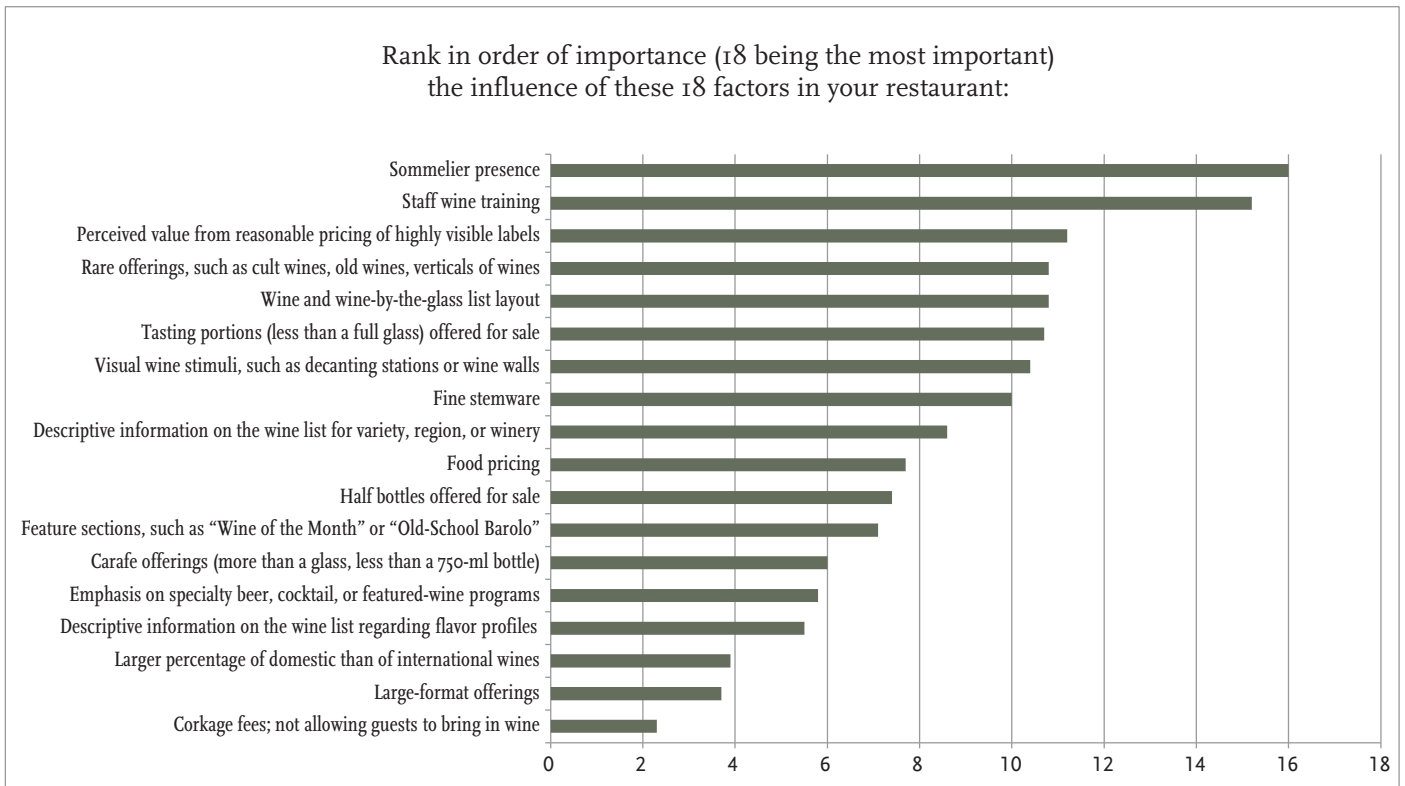
1. Sommelier presence is one of the most important positive correlations for increasing wine-check average.
2. Staff wine training is another of the most important positive correlations for increasing wine-check average.

These two variables were ranked most critical by a substantial margin over other factors. Following them, six items (highly visible labels, rare offerings, list layout, tasting portions, visual stimuli, and fine stemware) were grouped fairly closely together. Of course, there are always outliers; one sommelier at a union house declared that staff training was worthless in his case, since unionized employees are not motivated to sell wine.

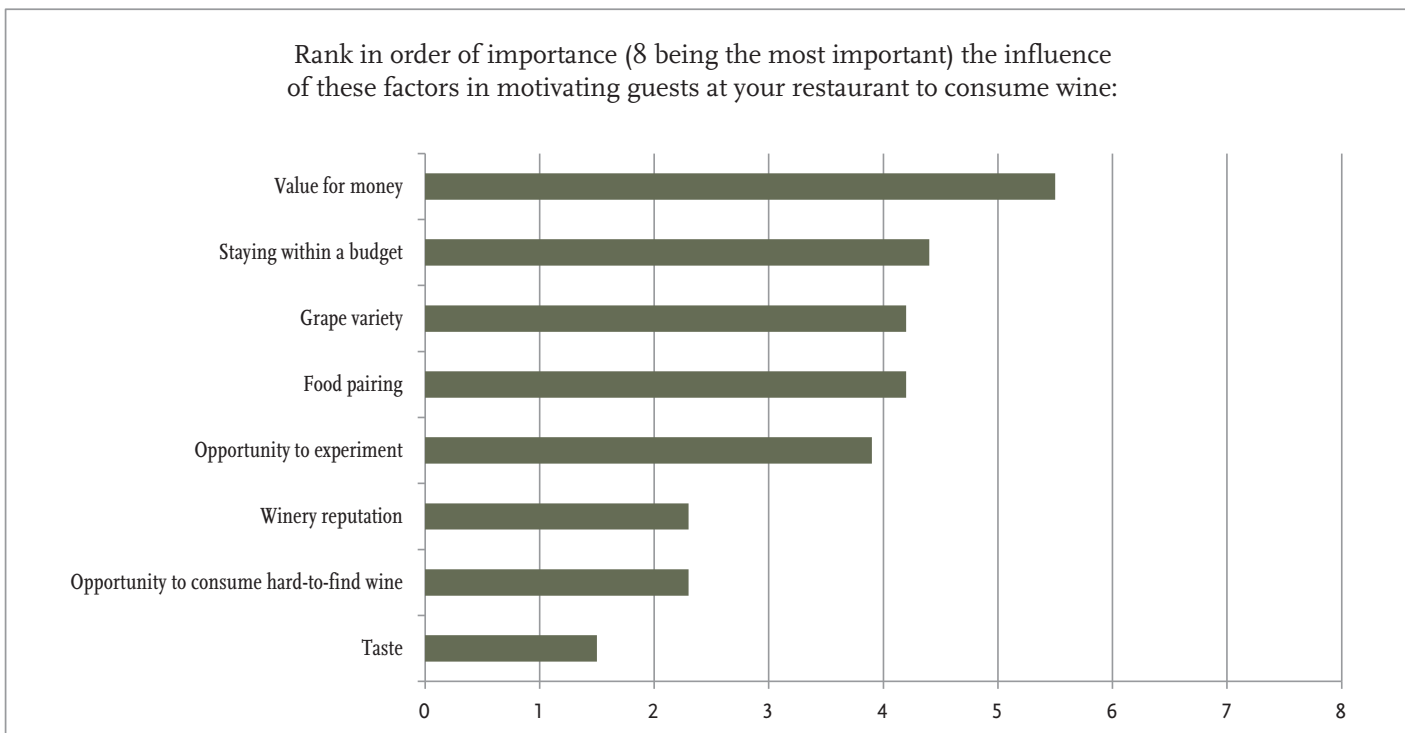
It should be noted that some wine directors have the back-office resources to perform extensive sales studies, while others must rely on simple reports from their point-of-sales systems and their own instincts. But a wine director who oversees a sizable number of locations (and happens to be a strong accountant to boot) told me, “The chances of selling bottles over \$100 goes up 20% with a sommelier in the room.” Even

# HOW TO BOOST YOUR AVERAGE WINE CHECK

## FACTORS INVOLVED IN INCREASING WINE-CHECK AVERAGES



## GUESTS' MOTIVATION FOR CONSUMING WINE



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wine directors at smaller restaurants observed that sommeliers brought in an extra \$10-20 per customer by recommending a bubbly to start, an extra glass with the mid-course or cheese, or a topping up.

Two other points stood out in my analysis of this ranking. Interestingly, the wine directors did not find food prices to be particularly significant when it came to wine sales. One could postulate that diners in celebrity-chef restaurants expect to spend a fair amount of money; indeed, many sommeliers I spoke with commented that wine prices in their restaurants were aligned with food prices, so that guests didn't feel they were under- or overspending for wine. Pricing may be more crucial in casual-dining restaurants. The second point of interest is that the two "self-help" options—conveying descriptive information about wines through the list—were not considered major influences on check averages. Of course, it is possible that the sommeliers underrated these categories while overrating their own contributions.

The results also point out the importance of combining sales skills and techniques with knowledge. Every sommelier I interviewed claimed that earning their guests' trust was a key to ringing up sales. To them, this meant providing wine service that "feels good" to the diner. For instance, more than half of the sommeliers interviewed mentioned that they poured 6 ounces by the glass because 5 ounces just didn't seem as generous. Gaining trust also meant teaching staff at every possible turn; one

veteran made an important distinction between "stimulation" and "training," pointing out that whereas everyone wants to be educated, no one wants to be schooled.

The other revealing question concerned guests' motivation for spending on wine. The responses (see the graph at the bottom of p. 85) argue against an emphasis on rare grape varieties and famous wineries; rather, they suggest that guests are most concerned about the affordability and enjoyability of their wines.

## Drawing Conclusions

It seems obvious that a wine list must be designed to communicate. One savvy sommelier was rewarded with an uptick in sales of his after-dinner wine flight upon changing its description from "Sweet-Wine Flight" to "Vins pour le Fromage." As another wine director noted, "Wine-list design is a legitimate art. It is so banal when a wine list is simply organized by price. That's a standard that any chimp can follow. Engage the guest!" A final quote neatly summed it all up: "For your wine program, make wine service a verb. You must act."

New York City's top sommeliers seem to agree that a sommelier on the floor and a fine-tuned education program can both have a significant impact on the wine-check average. In the end, however, check averages really boil down to the vibe of the restaurant and the nuances of the dining experience. Some are similar, but no two are alike. ♡



*Author Christy Canterbury, MW, at work in New York City.*

Photo by Michael Seto