



Wine, mixed drinks paired with what's on the plate

By Tony Poer

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There are wineries within shouting distance of almost every restaurant in Napa Valley, but none take the concept quite as literally as Calistoga's Solbar.

With more than a dozen local producers forming the "Stone's Throw" section of the Michelin-starred establishment's diverse wine list, diners at Solbar have an opportunity to drink locally. Very locally, in fact, from across town to just across the street.

Solage Resort's signature restaurant opened in 2007 under the direction of Executive Chef Brandon Sharp, with wines offered to complement Sharp's creative "California soul food" menu. Helmed since the summer of 2012 by sommelier Scott Turnbull, the wine and spirits program at the Calistoga resort is one of Napa Valley's most carefully curated and, notwithstanding the nod to old-school Calistoga viticulture, one of the region's most forward-reaching. With hard-earned credentials and an eye for the unusual, Turnbull has established himself as the man for the sommelier job at the top of the Valley. The eloquent Pennsylvania native got there with a style that is decidedly understated.

"The way I view a wine list is that it's there for the guests," Turnbull said recently between meetings with wine salespeople, taking an afternoon respite in a quiet courtyard just outside Chef

"You can go to a bar and drink. You go to a restaurant to eat. If you have a great wine list too, then that enhances the experience. So with that, I want to make sure that, as far as the pairing goes, that the wine complements the menu."



Sharp's busy kitchen. A true sommelier, neither food nor dining customers ever seem to leave his thoughts.

"You want to have that something, just as with a menu, because a wine list is a menu. You want cards in your deck or things up your sleeve that you can pretty much make everyone happy with, by speaking with them and finding out what mood they're in and what direction they want to go. That's based on seasonality, that's based on cuisine, [as well as] price point. I like having great bottles of wine that are not expensive and great bottles that are more expensive."

"Coming from a fine dining background," he added, "you want to make sure that people come in and feel well-served and find value."

With an advanced level of wine education and training, not to mention an impressive résumé, Turnbull is uniquely positioned to steer and shape the beverage program he inherited from his predecessor, Bradley Wasserman.

"I guess the basic idea of the

program is still kind of constant," he said, describing his wine-buying role. "That being, of course, taking care of our friends and neighbors. We are, happily, a destination for guests and tourists who come from outside the Napa Valley, so I want to make

wine list structure. But here, people come here to go to wineries and to find out what they can't get outside of the Valley. So that has been a constant."

Though Turnbull is a relative newcomer to the restaurant scene in Napa Valley, he was exposed to



Chef Brandon Sharp earned his sixth one-star rating from Michelin.

sure that we represent that. I come from the East Coast, where there's a much more Euro-centric

wine culture in the early 2000s as a French major newly graduated from Penn State University. Not

Scott Turnbull, 35, is the sommelier at Solage Calistoga's Solbar where cocktails and good wines are always on the menu.

wanting to go straight to graduate school, he found himself teaching English at a high school in Tain l'Hermitage, France. There was a hotel lycée in the Calistoga-sized Rhône Valley wine town where Turnbull had regular opportunities to tag along with high school sommeliers-in-training (this was France, after all). "I got to help them describe wines in English," he recalled with a smile, "and I got to taste a lot of wines."

A professor at the hotel school took notice and eventually referred him to Philadelphia's most celebrated French restaurant, Le Bec-Fin. Upon his return to his hometown—and in true apprentice fashion—Turnbull started at Le Bec-Fin polishing wine glasses, then worked his way up after a short time to the sommelier position. It was a fairly astounding career feat for a recent college grad.

"I was 23," he laughed. "It was being in the right place at the right time, and it was a great experience. Then I just wanted to, you know, try something else. By the time I left [Le Bec-Fin], I wanted to have some more adventure: in Atlanta, working for Guenter Seeger, then back to Philly, then

Fountain Restaurant at the Four

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Seasons, and then I came out here."

When Wasserman was on his way out of Solage in 2012, the hiring manager of the Philadelphia Four Seasons directed Turnbull to the impending job vacancy. Up to then, his sole Napa Valley visit had been a brief one, ten years ago for a sommelier summit. "I had only been here once for a few days before I decided to move here," he said.

"I leapt at the chance, because who doesn't want to be a sommelier in the Napa Valley?"

It was, of course, a rhetorical question for Turnbull. He landed the position at Solage and started in August of that year. With wine certifications from both the Society of Wine Educators and the Court of Master Sommeliers, he is a valuable asset to the resort's respected culinary program. Solbar received its sixth consecutive Michelin star this year, so it's a given that the restaurant would have a person with Turnbull's credentials heading the beverage department.

For his part, though, he's deferential to Brandon Sharp's culinary agenda and downright reverent of the relationship of wine to food. "People come here for the food," he acknowledged. "The wine is a part of that, but food is what really drives the restaurant. You can go to a bar and drink. You go to a restaurant to eat. If you have a great wine list too, then that enhances the experience. So with that, I want to make sure that, as far as the pairing goes, that the wine complements the menu."

Consistent recognition in the Michelin Guide has only increased the destination factor of the resort and raised Solbar's profile considerably since the 2007 opening. Turnbull takes neither for granted and made an interesting analogy.

"You know, if you have a really fantastic-looking car, and it's shiny, it's got all chrome, and then you turn it on and it goes 15 miles an hour and that's it, then your expectation isn't met. When you see a Michelin star, with how seriously people take food and wines these days, you need to make sure when they come in that the service is there, and that

the bar program is there, that the wine is there."

Still only 35, he has been in his career long enough to witness significant shifts in the food and wine industries, not just with the farm-to-table restaurant phenomenon but also with regard to the fast-rising popularity of alcoholic beverages not made from grapes.

"It's not like it was even ten to twelve years ago when I started," he observed. "At the places in Philly, you know, cocktails weren't as big of a thing. Now cocktails are a serious portion, and a lot of people judge programs on the seasonality of the drink menus and the creativity there."

As MFK Fisher once wrote, "First we eat, then we do everything else." Judging from the layout of Solbar's drinks list, Turnbull might say, "First, we make cocktails." Within compact leather binders, the wine and spirits list is broken up into nearly 20 sections. On page three, ingredient-driven cocktail selections set a clever tone. Perusing them, a Cabernet-flattened wine tourist sitting at Solbar's chic concrete bar around 5 p.m. would find palate-lifting options after a long day of tasting, with choices like a cool "Smoke on the Water" (aged tequila and smoked paprika) or "The Remedy" (artisan San Francisco gin and mint syrup). And via concoctions such as the "Fiery Love Potion" (Godiva liqueur and red chile syrup) and "Sex in the Valley" (don't ask), Turnbull and his mixology team clearly also have their overnight guests in mind.

A California-centric craft beer list follows the cocktails page, before giving way to Turnbull's nearly 300 wine selections. The bottles list is heavily populated with Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Sauvignon Blanc. Filling the gaps in between, there's the category of pretty much everything else, and that vast range of colors and flavors is well-represented in his careful selections. He has inserted a few personal favorite European wines that, in his opinion, are excellent with food. These include a rare Grand Cru Alsation white wine; a lonely, charming Beaujolais from the village of Fleurie; a longer lineup of German Rieslings and small-grower Champagnes; and a textbook Rhône Valley Syrah from the Crozes-

Hermitage appellation, very close to the town where he once taught French teenagers how to say "this wine might be corked" in English.

The European sections of the list are shorter by design, but the Napa Valley and other California choices are not restricted to the more recognizable grape varieties. In addition to those, Turnbull "sneaks in," as he described it, "more exotic varietals like Verdelho from up the road at Coquerel. There's the Scheurebe grown by Joseph Phelps just down the road."

The reporter was dumbfounded by the existence of Napa Valley Scheurebe.

"We poured that as a dessert wine," he explained. "They make it in an ice wine style. There's Grignolino down at Heitz. There's Charbono here in Calistoga, for some heritage and for something more exotic. There's Tempranillo by Parador. Larkmead has Friulano."

He then described the previously mentioned "Stone's Throw" section (with its great subheading, "Wineries within shouting distance"). The page highlights producers working not just in the Calistoga AVA but in the immediate vicinity of Solage, mostly with obscure or traditional, up-valley grape varieties. "Kenefick Ranch is just across the street," he pointed out. "You can actually throw a stone and hit a vineyard!"

As is Turnbull's style, when asked what drove this desire to differentiate his wine program from so many others in wine country restaurants, he turned the conversation back to food.

"There's the matter of finding things that are a bit more special and unique," he replied. "As food and wine have evolved as a pastime in America, I find that it's more of that exclusivity of what was special about whatever that may be: this dish is special because Chef has a fantastic relationship with the purveyor. We have tomatoes in the summertime that are picked in the morning and brought here in the afternoon, and they never see a refrigerator. Here, we get to have access to wines that don't get out of the valley and don't get distributed. It's just because they're our friends and neighbors."

"We want to show the best of the valley and show things that are unexpected."

"Scott's a nonlinear thinker,"

said Brandon Sharp, giving up a few minutes of a busy afternoon to chat wine. "His points of attack when it comes to why he pairs a certain wine with a certain dish are different from mine. The pairings that I have in mind, I can always taste them in my head and how it makes sense, so it's fascinating to hear someone else's really well thought-out and educated point of view about it."

Sharp described an unexpected character trait he had come to recognize in his wine director.

"He's a listener rather than a talker, which is a rare trait for a sommelier. Instead of trying to educate people about wine or force his palate or his opinions upon them, he's listening to them."

"When they've made up their mind," the chef conceded, "then yes, he's giving them what they want. But if they're open to it, Scott's redirecting them towards something they may not have tried before, but it's going to please and excite them."

Among the "nonlinear" offerings in the pages of Solbar's wine and spirits list are the wines on tap, a holdover from Turnbull's predecessor. A bit of editorial heads up the page: these wines are "as guilt-free as drinking gets," it reads, thanks to the greatly reduced packaging used to put wine in kegs.

"I inherited [the tap system], I'm happy to say, but I absolutely love it, and I really think there's more and more opportunity with that."

Page eight of the list, dubbed "The Hot Sheet," is a true one-of-a-kind aspect of Solbar's wine program: a half-dozen wines are noted as being staff favorites, along with tasting comments attributed to the staff member who chose the wine. Chef Sharp, being the chef, was at the top of this page with his pick of Pascal Lallement Champagne. "When in doubt," went his comment, "bubble up."

As a local winemaker who spends a lot of time conducting business at Solbar and has his wines on Turnbull's list, Dan Petroski is a fan of his approach to getting unusual wines in front of the restaurant's many visitors.

The winemaker for Larkmead Vineyard and his own project, Massican, shared over the phone that "it's really kind of home-grown, with a lot of Calistoga support on that side of the list."

"When you have a dozen, two dozen, or maybe 50 restaurants in Napa Valley all managing to differentiate themselves with a lot of the same producers on their lists, the 'Stone's Throw' is the perfect way to do that. And maintaining that as part of the list is really cool."

"Another section which I think is pretty cool on the list is 'The Hot Sheet,'" he said.

"If you're a tourist looking in, you're always asking the locals for recommendations. And what better place to do it than with the sommelier and waitstaff of a Michelin star restaurant? It's a great opportunity to be exposed to something through recommendations, and word-of-mouth is the best form of marketing."

The well-respected Jerry Seps of Storybook Mountain, who is another Calistoga winemaker and supplier to Solbar, commented in a thoughtful email that "Scott is one of those buyers with whom it is a pleasure to work: polite, knowledgeable and decisive."

"He has fashioned an excellent wine program, not only covering all the basics, but showing a sensitivity to local wines of quality. I look forward to pouring for him for many years."

Reality crowded back into Turnbull's afternoon in the form of yet another appointment with yet another wine rep. He lingered on a final thought about food and growing up in Philadelphia.

"It's something that I've always been into," he said. "When I was a kid, we didn't have cable at my house, so I'd spend Saturday afternoons watching the cooking shows. I've always been really into food and, while not drinking as a kid, I would watch Julia Child or the Frugal Gourmet and Secrets of the CIA, this really old-school Culinary Institute program. It was really funny. So I've always been into it, and as I got older, that interest in food applied itself naturally to wine and to spirits, as well. Just as I like to cook a lot at home, making drinks and cooking are the creation of a recipe that you want to enjoy, and you want it to be tasty and well-balanced."

"A good dish and good cocktail have sympathetic criteria."

A little breeze kicked up in the courtyard as a group of returning wine tasters wandered past and into Solbar, ready, perhaps, for something stronger and yet more refreshing than Cabernet.