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Auber: Wine guru Mark Oldman

recommends taking the road less traveled to find good wine

By Arianna Auber

Wine expert Mark Oldman wants you to do exactly the opposite of what you'd probably do gazing down at a restaurant's wine list while a waiter pauses, pen on paper, for your order.

Ask for the wines you can't pronounce, the Aglianicos or the Beaujolais varieties, all those long Italian or French words that often intimidate casual wine drinkers into ordering something more recognizable. It's not just about being bold, Oldman stresses — it'll often get you a good deal.

“There are tendencies when people see words hard to pronounce to not order the wine,” he said. “But that doesn't make it bad wine. What happens is (the bottles) become less popular and get marked down. That's a better value.”

Oldman — wine columnist for the Food Network, author of two accessible, informative wine guides and panelist for the third year in a row at the Austin Food & Wine Festival starting Saturday — has earned his bona fides as an authority on wine by, as he puts it, not “leaning too hard on the grape pomposity.”

You won't catch him talking about fermentation, for example. Instead, you'll learn two important lessons from him about wine: that some of the less familiar ones can often reward you with delicious, intriguing new flavors, and how to get a cheaper bill at the end of the night. But if you need a little nudge before you can take the leap and try a new style, don't be afraid to ask someone, such as the wine sommelier at a restaurant or the owner of a mom-and-pop liquor store, for their suggestions and opinions.

“Seek out a wine merchant who has the divining rod on wine and you might find a wine you've never had before,” Oldman said. “But another question is whether you can trust their recommendations. I always ask myself, ‘Could you sit down and have a drink with them?’ If you could, then yes.”

He qualifies as one of those experts you could clink glasses with at happy hour. Full of anecdotes and random facts about the world's less recognized wine regions, he's been into wine since his college days at Stanford, when he started a campus club called the Stanford Wine Circle, educating fellow students and friends about his passion with an “anti-snob” focus. And he's a regular speaker at big wine events like the festival here this weekend, where he's giving three seminars: “Outsmart the Wine List,” “Bubbly Worth Savoring” and “Hunt for the Next Malbec.”

Here are some of his tips for the budding wine connoisseur:

Don't overlook rosé or bubbly wines. These often can be scorned and passed over for a pinot noir or other red, but as Oldman points out, they pair very well with some of the spicy food and barbecue Texas can't get enough of.

"I grabbed a bottle of really amazing rosé champagne from Spec's to pair with the ribs at Salt Lick," he said. "The guy at the counter, when he saw me getting the champagne, he said, 'That's not going to work with ribs.' But certain bubbly wines can have almost a beer-like effect — low in alcohol, cold and refreshing. It can calm down some of the spicy barbecue rubs."

He also recommends trying Zinfandel or semi-sweet Riesling when it comes to food with heat. Good wines aren't always in the \$50 or up range. At that point, Oldman said, you are often paying for the brand, the perceived value of it, rather than its quality or taste. At \$20, you can easily find a high-quality wine; some of the best ones he's suggested people try have been within the \$12 to \$17 range.

Take a risk and try wine from a region that isn't California, France or Italy. Those lower-priced but top-notch wines, Oldman said, are often "less heralded, harder to pronounce, more neglected because they're from a region like Texas or Long Island or Greece. While respected, they're not on the world stage yet; they're in a fished but not yet polluted, crowded pond."

Texas wineries have come a long way since first setting up shop in the scenic Hill Country, but even some locals might not pick up their bottles because they don't recognize Viognier and Tempranillo and other more obscure grape varietals Texas winemakers choose to experiment with (the grapes thrive in this climate and soil).

When Oldman has returned home from past Austin Food & Wine Festivals, however, he's had bottles of Texas wine from Whole Foods in hand.