

Practice makes perfect

Sommelier's varied restaurant career hones discerning taste for fine wine

BY JULES TORTI

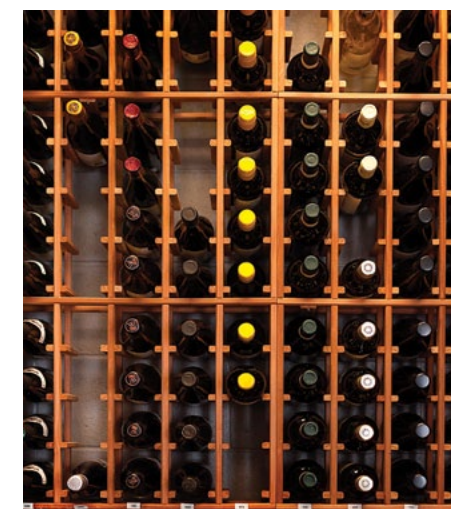
PHOTOGRAPHY • CRESTINA MARTINS

When Kevin Wallace was blankly staring out the windows of his high school in Port Moody, B.C., he wasn't daydreaming about life as a sommelier. Ironically, he was looking directly at the Andres Wine facility (the babyface of the Canadian wine industry in 1961).

However, Wallace skipped the prerequisite introduction to adulthood via a bush party and Andres' iconic sparkling Baby Duck and fast-tracked to the sophistication of ouzo.

There's a lot of romance attached to the notion of being a sommelier. At the time of our interview, Wallace was the effervescent wine steward at the Bruce Hotel in Stratford, where he was also rather comfortable in the company of Hamlet and the Bard. The 21 deluxe rooms and four petite suites at the hotel are each inspired by a Shakespearean character. Wallace's undergrad at Queen's University focused on the classics and his post-graduate pursuits and ensuing PhD were in ancient Greek comedy at St. Andrew's in Scotland.

He came to the Bruce almost two years ago with a varied resumé. In Scotland he worked at a small boutique hotel and "became hooked on the idea of how much



there was to know about wine and how far I was away from knowing it."

Every one of his places of employment has had an imposing wine list. "I tasted a lot and then learned the theory behind it. I tasted so many great wines across the board in an informal setting without the pressure of education."

Not that Wallace doesn't have credentials. He earned his sommelier designation from the Wine and Spirit Education Trust. The international guild provides education and qualifications for wine and spirit enthusiasts. Product knowledge and tasting skills are the focus of the diploma program that's

offered in over 60 countries.

The curious and self-taught can visit the guild's website (www.wsetglobal.com) and follow the Knowledge Centre link to learn how to pronounce a cascading list of wines like that pesky Gewurtraminer (sometimes colloquially referred to as "Gewurtz").

These days, Wallace is at equal ease sharing his die-hard affection for Nicolas Joly's Loire Valley wines, Montreal wine lists that he envies, and thoughts on amateur grape snob Paul Giamatti's character Miles in the movie "Sideways."

However, because he worked as a general manager at several restaurants first, Wallace gleaned much of his intel from practice. His exposure to so many wines (in so little time) allowed him to begin to recognize the hallmarks and characteristics naturally, versus curriculum textbooks.

His self-directed route also taught him that it "wasn't enough to taste in a closed setting anymore."

He began talking to winemakers about "technical" in Washington State and Oregon. In April he toured the seductive wine valleys of Australia.

"We brush everything over with generalities, but the valley floor versus the higher altitude is so complex from Australia's Walla

Sommelier Kevin Wallace has had a varied career in the restaurant business.



Kevin Wallace (right) is shown with executive chef Arron Carley at the Bruce Hotel in Stratford.

Walla region to Washington's Red Mountain wines.

"Tasting and actually visiting these regions is paramount because there's a limitation to what the LCBO presents. There's a bottleneck at the LCBO," Wallace says, laughing at the unexpected pun.

•••

During our interview, Wallace, 44, was enthusiastic about the Bruce, which is a four-diamond hotel – a ratings system designated by the AAA/CAA Diamond Awards for accommodations and restaurants throughout Canada and the United States. The hotel has earned the coveted four stars in both lodging and dining for good reason.

Wallace was also pleased to be connected to executive chef Arron Carley, who this summer nabbed the title of top chef and \$10,000 on the Food Network's cutthroat cooking competition, "Chopped Canada."

But fate had other plans for Wallace. About a month after our interview, he

received an enticing call "out of the blue" from a friend in real estate. Tim Dutaud and Wallace had worked together for about five years at trendy Toronto restaurants Kultura and Spice Route.

The pair used to talk about opening their own place, but Wallace says that type of chatter happens all the time. "Sometimes talk is talk."

And sometimes it comes to fruition. Dutaud had his eye on an old diner in Toronto that closed earlier this year: Maybe they should take it over.

"I love the Bruce," Wallace says. "It's going to do amazing things."

But the diner possibilities could not be overlooked, so he made plans to leave The Bruce at the end of October. "This is an opportunity to steer my own course," he notes.

The place Wallace and Dutaud are taking over was called the Bus Terminal, and they are considering keeping the name. Located

at 1606 Danforth Ave., it had been a neighbourhood landmark for almost 70 years, known for its simple, throwback foods.

Wallace says there will definitely be a wine component to the new place, but he wants it to be family oriented. "I don't want it to be a wine bar."

Instead, he's aiming for an urban diner like those popular in New York. He hopes people used to dining there will rediscover some of their old favourites. They will be updated, of course, to feature more handmade, fresh ingredients.

It will be interesting to see how his wine list develops in his new establishment. At the Bruce, Wallace was always approachable and knowledgeable about food pairings.

"I encourage guests to hang out and chat," he said in our original interview. "Wine changes over conversation. It's about sharing. I try to match profiles of guests. If a guest says they like big California cabs,

together we try and figure out the best match for them."

Wallace shuns the cookie-cutter approach and public opinion that beef can only be paired with red. "I want guests to experience how wine changes with food."

And if the guest disagrees and his matchmaking skills are awry? "I appreciate honest feedback, especially when there is a disagreement in a pairing. I learn from the palates of others. I'm not so egotistical that I impose my own taste."

Changing the ingrained attitude of loyalists who are convinced they only drink white, or only drink merlot, is a constant battle.

For Wallace, the next hurdle is convincing guests that the most impressive wines aren't necessarily the most expensive. Still, the electric charge he gets from "tank samples, single key, vintages and wines that never leave a winery" is evident in his voice.

•••

If you ask Wallace about his wine rack at home, envisioning enviable verticals and dusty bottles bearing the passports of his palate-based travels, you may be surprised. He doesn't believe in collecting.

"I like to share. Each bottle has a memory and there's always a perfect time for each one. I always emphasize sharing, not showing off. It's like my mom boasting about a new dress. She'll say to me, 'Guess how much I paid for this dress?' It's not about rhyming off some designer label and designer price. The thrill is in the boast."

Like the \$19 dress his mother found, "people should and want to feel like rock stars for finding good \$20 bottles. How little I pay for a wine is the biggest boast, not showing off the trophy bottles. And, just as there are so many great outfits on the runway, they're impressive — but you need to have an everyday wardrobe too. Everyday wines are just as important as trophy wines."

Even though the industry suffers from an inevitable old boys' club clique, Wallace doesn't want wines to be exclusive or

Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery
25 Caroline Street North, Waterloo
www.theclayandglass.ca
519-746-1882

THE CLAY & GLASS
EARTH • FIRE • LIGHT

AUTHENTIC
DESIRABLE
EXCEPTIONAL

Shop in
person
or online



22K Gold and Lustre Glaze Vase, Jan Phelan

SHOP.THECLAYANDGLASS.COM

DUNN HEATING CLIMATECARE.

CALL THE EXPERTS WHEN YOU ARE LOOKING TO INVEST IN QUALITY, COMFORT AND ENERGY SAVINGS.

We Take Pride in Serving Our Region For Over 43 Years

Well done by
Dunn

Heating • Air Conditioning • Fireplaces
SINCE 1973

K-W SHOWROOM: 519-746-6000 | CAMBRIDGE: 519-658-0543
GUELPH /FERGUS: 519-787-0965 | FAX: 519-746-6015

www.dunnheating.com



The Artful Badger
Classic Shaving Goods
and other
Gentlemanly Luxuries

96 Downie Street - Stratford
(Opposite the Avon Theatre)
(519) 273-7337 artfulbadger.ca

intimidating. "Wine needs to be accessible. I want people to learn, or at least be able to taste."

His passion for the industry is bone-deep. It's apparent that he ignites with learning in general. He explains his fascination with the biodynamic movement of Nicolas Joly's Coulée de Serrant wines from France.

"They don't manipulate the wines or vines so you truly taste the region.

"These wines, they're about seeking a balance with nature, making an effort to understand it. It's about love, respect and lifestyle. There's this mystical element too. The biodynamic movement observes lunar cycles. They won't taste a wine on certain days because of the humidity or where the moon is at."

Speaking of humidity, it's no surprise that Wallace is chronically in charge of bringing wine to summer barbecues, cottage weekends, Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas gatherings. "Yes. I entertain several phone calls from friends desperately asking, 'What should I bring?' I'm more cautious in my recommendations now though. I sold out my favourite winery in B.C. because of it."

And what about Ontario wines? "I love how the South Coast wineries are using the land with such forward thinking. It's like when the Fraser Valley (B.C.) fruit wineries started pushing the envelope by mixing Fraser and Okanagan fruit together."

He applauds and cheerleads the effort behind dealing with the cool climate and ingenuity of the solar and vegan wines and Burning Kilm's repurposing of tobacco kilns in the wine-making process.

"It's not what you are drinking so much – it's more about the terroir, the people greeting you, the history of the South Coast region. And you can't have a conversation about Ontario wines without mentioning visionary Norman Hardie and what he's done in Prince Edward County."

...

Just as his wine list and wine rack are a reflection of friends, Australian sunsets and

sharing, his experience in the hospitality industry is evident in there too.

His formative years were spent at the Asian-inspired Rain (now closed) in Toronto, in the city's still-trending King West neighbourhood.

"I started off as a server, gleaned knowledge from the staff who would gather every night after a shift to debate drinks and food. Everyone cared."

The initial crew he worked with continued in the industry with impressive accolades to their names. One is now an apprentice at NOMA. (Chef René Redzepi's 20-course dinners in the Denmark establishment are legendary enough to warrant reservation wait lists of over 60,000 in 2015.) Another founded the wildly popular Bar Chef on Toronto's social savvy Queen West, known best for its list of 5,000 bitters and clever cocktails.

Rain was featured on the first season of the Food Network's "Opening Soon" series (2002), a program dedicated to showing the behind-the-scenes fever of new restaurant openings.

Rain was one of the few restaurants featured that wasn't shuttered shortly after filming and also dominated the spotlight on the Network's "Made to Order" (2004-06).

"I can't watch FoodTV or shows about the industry anymore," Wallace says. "I'm living them. That was my day."

At Rain, Wallace climbed through the ranks to manager and general manager and introduced five- and six-course tasting menus and wine pairings.

"We went from two to four stars. We all wanted things to work – we'd go home and consult books and get on the Internet to find more ammunition for the next shift's debate. 'What can make us better?' was the stronghold. We'd even change quotations on Wikipedia just to prove ourselves right to coworkers."

The stronghold of Rain is still cork-screwed tightly into Wallace. He's always taking stock of being better, tasting better. And, lucky for us, he likes to share. ☺

HOLIDAY FINDS
by **ECS COFFEE**
explore · create · savour



The Chemex Coffeemaker makes perfect coffee; clear, pure, flavourful and without bitterness or sediment every time. This brewing method is a true artform!
Chemex Classic Series 6-Cup Coffeemaker
\$44.99
Find more coffee gear at www.ecscoffee.com.



Le Creuset Signature Cast-Iron Oval French Oven 4.7L - Flame
\$319.99
Many more sizes & colours to choose from at www.ecscoffee.com.



Connects via bluetooth to your smart phone to brew your drinks automatically! Find this machine and more at www.ecscoffee.com.
Saeco GranBaristo Avanti Automatic Espresso Machine
\$2,999.99



Vitamix Heritage Collection Pro Series 750 Blender
\$749.99



Kate Spade New York Tea Kettle, Deco Dot
\$49.99
See the entire collection at www.ecscoffee.com.



This hand made precision coffee machine quietly brews one of the world's finest pots of coffee in just 4 to 6 minutes.
Technivorm Moccamaster KBG-741AO Coffee Maker, Polished Silver
\$419.99



Impress your guests with perfect lattes, cappuccinos & espresso every time - at the touch of a button.
Nespresso Inissia Espresso Maker & Aeroccino Plus Milk Frother - Red
\$199.99
Available in 4 colours at www.ecscoffee.com.



FIND THESE GIFTS AND MORE AT WWW.ECSCOFFEE.COM
OR VISIT OUR KITCHENER LOCATION AT 4391 KING ST E, KITCHENER ONTARIO | N2P 2G1