

Q&A: WAITROSE CELLAR'S
XENIA IRWIN MW

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SMITH BREAKS IT DOWN

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UP FROM DOWN UNDER

HARPERS WINE & SPIRIT

AT THE HEART OF THE DRINKS TRADE

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CHARGE FOR QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

In an effort to help guests understand wine better, Berners Tavern has introduced guided private tastings. **Clinton Cawood** talks to the architect of the initiative

ON-TRADE

Next month Jason Atherton's Berners Tavern at The London Edition is launching a series entitled An Introduction to Wine, hosted by director of wine Matteo Montone. On Monday nights 12 guests will be guided through the basics of wine in the restaurant's private dining room, with each guest receiving 15% off their bill if they dine in the restaurant afterwards. Harpers spoke to Montone about the new initiative, and about the impressive wine offering at Berners Tavern.

What inspired you to create these introductory wine sessions for your guests?

We realise that some of our guests are sometimes afraid to say things about wine, and I have a very creative director of F&B, Lance Perkins, who is always pushing me in the right direction. So we decided to have those guests in to help them understand how to taste wine.

It's an informal thing. In an hour I'll run through four wines with them and tell them how to taste, how to hold a glass, what acidity is, what tannins are, as well as suggesting some food pairings. I'm excited, because I always tend to talk about wine only at a certain level with my sommeliers, or with certain guests.

It brings people to Berners Tavern, and the price is just £30. Within seven or eight hours the first two dates were fully booked, so we'll be launching more dates. After that we want to do an intermediate course, and maybe try to do one with fine wine as well.

What changes have you brought to Berners Tavern in your time there?

When I came here two years ago as head sommelier we only had 200 wines, but I'm lucky to work in a company which likes people to express themselves. I brought the wine list up to 800. Then Lance said: "Why don't you launch something different?" So now we have 70 wines by the glass available too.

That's a by-the-glass selection that many restaurants wish they had. How does that work, practically?

We serve many from the bottle, and some by Coravin. It wasn't a big worry because I trust my team, and we don't have a problem with wines not being sold. If a wine has an acceptable price point, within a week or two on Coravin we finish the bottle.

We also have a Champagne trolley, a fortified



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Matteo Montone

and sweet wine trolley. We're trying to make wine service interesting.

How has the industry changed in recent years? What are the current challenges?

The biggest challenge at the moment is finding staff – you know the reason for that.

But in the six years I've been in London, what's changed is that the sommeliers now tend to get more qualifications. Six years ago people didn't have all these qualifications with the Court of Master Sommeliers or with the WSET, but now everyone wants to have them.

By preparing for the qualification, your knowledge, your awareness of wine, increases, so that's what sommeliers are doing now, and what I suggest to my sommeliers too.