



sommelier

JOURNAL

The essential guide for wine professionals

Buying Wine, Buying Time

Today's sommeliers are
the ultimate multitaskers

Neighborhood Wine Bars

A San Francisco trend

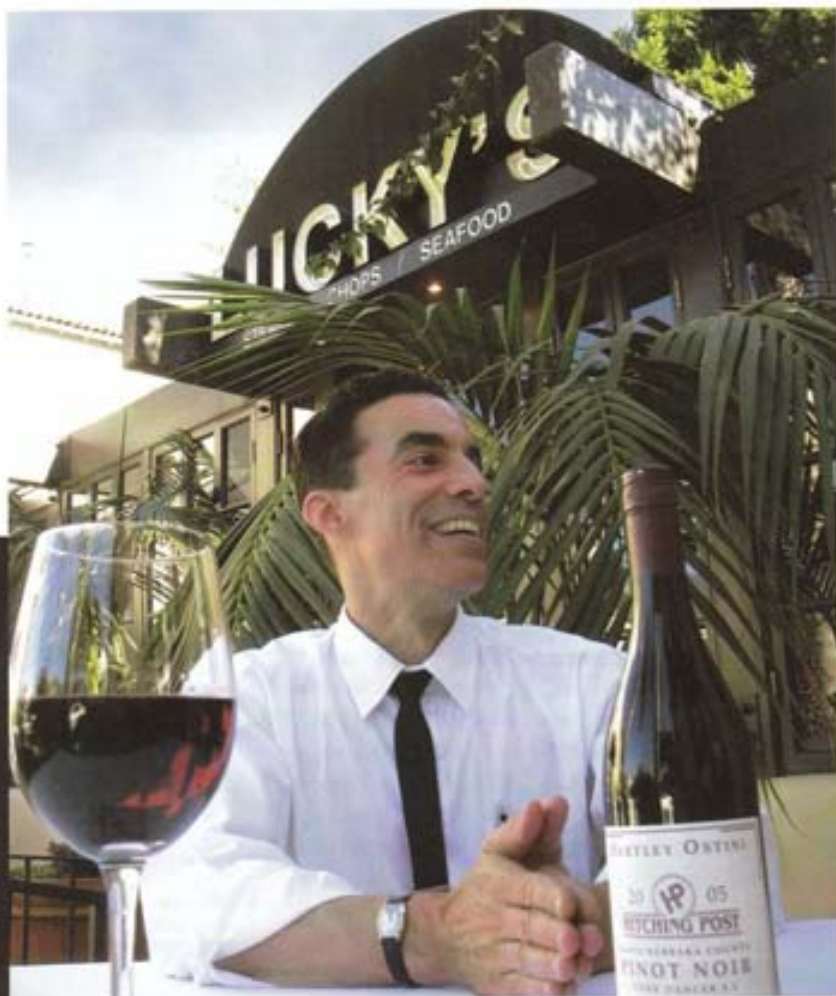
Wines of Altitude, Wines of Attitude

Premiere Issue 2008



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Lucky's, Montecito, California



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AS ERIC MALDONADO, THE MAÎTRE D' AND WINE DIRECTOR OF LUCKY'S STEAKHOUSE, PUTS IT, "FATE BOTH SMILED AT ME AND MOCKED ME BY PLACING ME IN A POSITION TO BUY WINE."

In Montecito, next door to Santa Barbara on California's wine-savvy Central Coast, a great collection of California wines is not uncommon. What sets Lucky's apart is its list of French classics, as well as the option of private cellaring.

"It's a thrill to sell a wine like a 1970 Pétrus half-bottle," Maldonado says. Two such rare bottles are on Lucky's list for \$1,300 apiece. Even though the same wines might retail today for \$6,000 or more, Maldonado does not raise the price after his initial markup. He prefers to focus on the celebratory nature of great vintages to help him win a loyal clientele. "I try to draw out the customer as to why they are celebrating. Do they have a child—when was he or she born?"

To mark an important business occasion, for example, Maldonado might offer a 1982 Château Mouton-Rothschild at \$1,515 per bottle. "The wine is now on the market for the same price," he says. "The difference is that I know the provenance. From France to our Montecito locker, it has been re-racked only twice."

About 25% of Lucky's business is in wine sales, which net more than \$1 million a year. "The 25% is extremely vital to the business, representing our total profit for the year," Maldonado notes. "We get maximum return on our square footage, something like 36%."

In addition to housing the wine for a regular list (called "Great Wines") and a reserve list (called "Really Great Bottles"), about 20% of Lucky's wine storage is devoted to clients' private collections. One customer possesses Brunello verticals from 1898. "Yes, we're insured," Maldonado is quick to add.

Photos by Gary G. Kuist

WINE LIST EXCERPT

REALLY GREAT BOTTLES

*Bordeaux**Graves*

Ch. La Mission-Haut-Brion	1982	\$1,742
Ch. La Mission-Haut-Brion	1978	\$975
Ch. La Tour Haut-Brion	1982	\$1,009
Ch. Haut-Brion	1982	\$1,278
Ch. Haut-Brion	1981	\$455
Ch. Haut-Brion	1971	\$591
Ch. Haut-Brion	1966	\$591
Ch. Pape-Clément	1990	\$297
Ch. Pape-Clément	1961	\$738

Margaux

Ch. Margaux	1995	\$894
Ch. Margaux	1983	\$924
Ch. Margaux	1982	\$1,682
Ch. Rauzan-Ségla	1990	\$267
Ch. Margaux (Magnum)	1989	\$1,652

Moulis-en-Medoc

Ch. Chasse-Spleen	1982	\$245
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Pauillac

Ch. Lafite-Rothschild	1990	\$894
Ch. Lafite-Rothschild	1989	\$652
Ch. Lafite-Rothschild	1986	\$1,350

Ch. Lafite-Rothschild	1982	\$1,667
Ch. Lafite-Rothschild	1976	\$682
Ch. Lafite-Rothschild (Magnum)	1990	\$2,000
Ch. Lafite-Rothschild (Magnum)	1981	\$1,409
Ch. Latour	1996	\$894
Ch. Latour	1990	\$1,560
Ch. Latour	1988	\$617
Ch. Latour	1983	\$591
Ch. Latour	1982	\$2,106
Ch. Latour	1976	\$455
Ch. Latour	1975	\$530
Ch. Latour	1970	\$1,495
Ch. Latour (Magnum)	1996	\$1,712
Ch. Latour (Magnum)	1989	\$1,545
Les Forts de Latour	1990	\$327
Ch. Lynch-Bages	1986	\$482
Ch. Mouton-Baronne-Philippe	1978	\$530
Ch. Mouton-Baronne-Philippe	1971	\$530
Ch. Mouton-Rothschild	1995	\$682
Ch. Mouton-Rothschild	1989	\$682
Ch. Mouton-Rothschild	1988	\$591
Ch. Mouton-Rothschild	1983	\$591
Ch. Mouton-Rothschild	1982	\$1,515
Ch. Mouton-Rothschild	1975	\$530

Private cellaring is an important amenity for Lucky's: "Food is the driving engine of the restaurant business. If somebody selects, purchases, and serves their wine for special occasions, it's a huge compliment to cellar it for them. It signifies a personal trust in Lucky's. We step beyond merely being a restaurant to being part of family life and community."

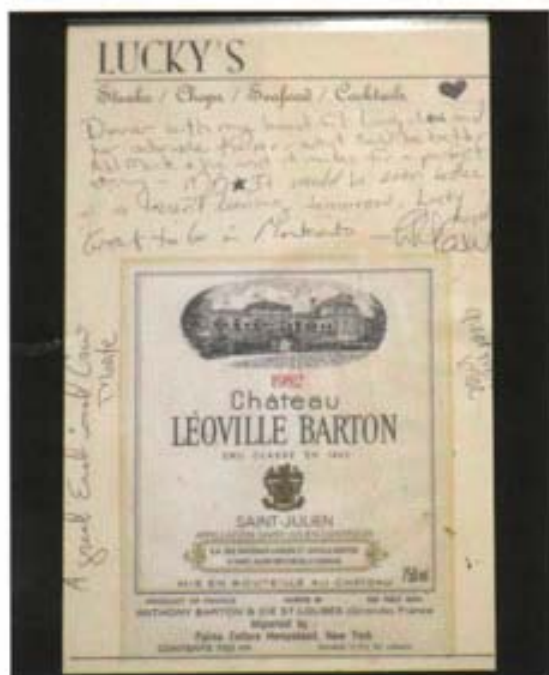
Often a customer will phone ahead with a request to decant prior to arrival, or ask Maldonado to select a bottle from the customer's own collection. "At that point, it has to be intuitive. I have to pair their wines to what they might order. It signifies the height of trust." In one case, a con man seeking to seduce an established customer asked Maldonado to cellar his wines. "I was willing to accept his wines so I could keep an eye on him. I felt protective of our customer."

Lucky's is constantly looking for ways to enhance the dining experience. Thanks to a suggestion from the owner, elegantly framed, hand-inscribed wine labels adorn one wall, memorializing special evenings. "We like our patrons to write about their event to crystallize their good time here," Maldonado says. Of course, once customers have seen the photographs and wine labels of everyone who has celebrated there before them, they also want to be part of Lucky's family.

Born in Geneva, Ill., Maldonado moved around from Los Angeles to New Jersey to Montreal to Madrid. "I got into wine because of my dad," he says. To celebrate a business transaction in 1970, his father chose a 1945 Château Lafite-Rothschild, a bottle that even then cost \$3,000. "Our honored guest did not drink. But one of his sons held the glass to his nose, saying,

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FIVE FAVORITES

Château Calon-Ségur, St. Estèphe 1926 and 1928

Pre-phylloxera and post-phylloxera. Large, currant-sherry Cabs with elegant body and a reassuring finish. Our bottles are in perfect condition—shoulders high, never recorked, and bought concurrently.

Simi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, Alexander Valley 2003

"Fist in the head" California winemaking. Massive body, bright cherry raspberry fruit, strong finish—makes you feel like you can conquer the world.

Château Pape-Clément, Pessac-Léognan 1961

Burnished, aromatic body with cocoa-bean fruit, chocolatey chewiness, and a just finish.

Travaglini Gattinara, Piedmont 2001

Massive body: if a brick were composed of sun-dried tomato and cedar, with 100 cherries, this would be it. Confident, bracing finish.

Jordan Cabernet Sauvignon Estate, Alexander Valley 2003

An underrated Cab. We recently started double-decanting our Jordan wines; just that bit of air produces the difference between "I paid \$83 for a bottle of Jordan" and "I only paid \$83 for a bottle of Jordan."

'just smell this.' When I saw the look on the father's face, I knew I wanted to know about wine. I've since run across another 1945 Lafite," he notes. "I have tasted a 1900 Margaux. You can smell the victory in the Lafite. You can sense the exhilaration of a turning century in the Margaux."

Seven years after that first encounter with the Lafite, Maldonado began his career at Bonelli's, a little restaurant in the Rolling Hills Estates area of Los Angeles. He joined Lucky's in 2000, prior to its opening. The restaurant was founded as a high-end American steakhouse by local businessmen Herb Simon, Jimmy Argyropoulos, and Gene Montesano and named after Montesano's other business, Lucky Brand Jeans.

Maldonado was also inspired by Club 21 in New York. "I recall a documentary about the restaurant. A rare bottle appeared in one shot while the camera panned Club 21's cellar. The sommelier casually mentioned the wines were stored for Richard Nixon and maintained even after his death for his family to enjoy."

Selling prized wines to people who don't know what they're drinking, however, can be disappointing. "Recently, a customer ordered all my bottles but one of Remoissenet Clos de Vougeot 1952. They enjoyed it, but they did not know the estate or the significance of the year. I was pleased to sell them, but every bottle broke my heart."

To obtain replacements for such sought-after wines, Maldonado says "I have incredible resources. One of my customers has a relationship with Clarets, a major player in DRC" (Domaine de la Romanée-Conti). Some clients will provide part of their allocation as a favor. If all else fails, the owner's impressive cellar is available to Maldonado.

Fate may have mocked Maldonado by placing him in the frustrating position of buying rare vintages not to keep, but to sell. But his passion for sharing the allure of fine wine keeps customers coming back to Lucky's.

