THREE-STAR SOMMELIER

When they couldn't buy the wine, they bought the winery

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ome of the world's most recognizable wines are expensive, hard-to-get items that make wine collectors swoon. They include Château Latour, a classic Bordeaux; Penfolds Grange, a shiraz from Australia; Château d'Yquem, a phenomenal Sauternes; and many other icon and expensive wines.

Then there are the lesser-known, yet still iconic, wines that only wine collectors know about — and still have a hard time getting their hands on despite high prices. These include such wines as Château Le Pin de Bordeaux; Vega Séllea Unico of Spain; and Giaconda Shiraz from Australia.

Among the wines that fall into this category of hard-to-get are some superb Burgundies and pinot noirs, most of which are made in tiny amounts, included in this subset is the winery that created the rush toward Russian River Valley for great pinot, Williams Selyem.

The wines of this small producer were so hard to get that people lined up to get on a waiting list, and then hoped someone would sell off the wine list so they could get a few bottles.

Among those who coveted the Williams Selyem pinotnurse were John and Katie Dyson, owners of Millbrook Winery in New York. They cut through the red tape and got as much of the Williams Selyem Pinots as they wanted, they bought the wine just a few years ago.

Dyson is well known and widely respected in New York. He was deputy mayor under New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani following the Sept. 11 terror attacks, has been commissioner of agriculture for New York and commissioner of commerce and chairman of the New York Power Authority.

Dyson developed the "Love NY" ad campaign. Recently, he was re-appointed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo to the Power Authority for another term.

Meanwhile, Millbrook in New York's Hudson Valley, which John and Kathie founded in the 1970s, continues to make superb wines, notably its chardonnay and a Zinfandel that are prized.

The challenge of living up to Michelin's lofty rating makes the job fun for Toulon

MATT VILLAND

Late last year, when The Restaurant at Meadowood received its first three-star rating from Michelin Guide, critics and foodies alike gave Chef Christopher Kostow much of the credit.

But for Toulon, the restaurant's sommelier, it was a big part of the accomplishment, too.

After all, Toulon, 32, oversees a 1,000-label wine list and a wide selection of constantly changing pairings by the glass. He's also a key part of the property's annual "12 Days of Christmas," a December gala that matches local winemakers with chefs from all over the world.

Add to these responsibilities daily tastings, weekly wine industry meetings and monthly trips to winemaking regions all over the world — there's hardly ever a dull moment for Toulon. "Being a sommelier at a restaurant of this caliber is quite a task," he says.

Toulon took a circuitous route to the hills of St. Helena. He was born in Vouvray, France, in the Loire Valley, and began working on the wine side of the restaurant business at age 15. After achieving his sommelier diploma in 1996, he took a job as a sommelier in another Michelin-starred restaurant, and won the acclaimed Young Sommelier of the Loire Valley award.

The following year, Toulon moved to Ireland's County Kerry, outside Cork, where he worked as a sommelier at the noted Shen Falls Lodge. There, he worked with the country's leading Master of Wine, Alain Bras.

Toulon finally moved west in 2000, when he joined Four Seasons and moved to Toronto to work out of company headquarters there. Over the next five years, he was dispatched to open or work at Four Seasons properties in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Tokyo and London. During his time in San Francisco, Toulon frequently visited the Napa Valley.

It was then that he decided to join the staff of Meadowood and make St. Helena his full-time home. "There is no place on earth like this place."

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Toulon says of the Napa Valley. "Even if you're not crazy about wine, the small-town feeling, the notion that you can walk down Main Street in (St. Helena) and everybody knows everybody - that's the kind of community I want to call home."

Granted, Toulon spends most of his time in the restaurant.

His day usually starts around 11 a.m. He spends an hour checking e-mail, meeting with Kostow and tackling day-to-day business. Next is what he calls, "Cellar Hour," during which he checks on inventory and calculates which bottles must be replaced.

From there, the sommelier usually sets up appointments to taste new releases and new vintages, and to meet with winery owners, winemakers and wine representatives.

"A big part of this job is keeping up with the trends and seeing what's new," he says.

Around 3 or 4 p.m., preparations for dinner service begin. Toulon makes sure all of his wines are stocked and stored properly. He also meets with Kostow and the staff to brainstorm wine pairings. Generally, the restaurant offers more than 30 pairings per night; these offerings represent nearly 70 percent of the eatery's total wine sales.

Once the restaurant opens, Toulon's job is all about customer service. He greets guests. He recommends wines. He answers questions. Like most sommeliers, he tries to accomplish all of these tasks discreetly, so as not to interrupt the dining experience.

"We want to make sure everything is smooth," Toulon says. "Diners should remember the wine, not the guy in charge of it."

Colleagues appreciate this gentle touch. Kostow, who has been at the restaurant since 2008, says Toulon "is good at focusing on people and relationships as well as what's in the bottle," adding that Toulon is able to procure wines that others are not, creating an exclusive experience for guests.

Winemakers agree, emphasizing Toulon's ability to pair.

"I've found Rom to be extremely knowledgeable about wine, and more importantly when pairing food and wine, he excels at bringing out the best in each," says Philippe Melka, co-founder and winemaker at Melka Wines.

Looking forward, at least professionally, Toulon says his goal for 2011 is simple: Consistency. He notes that three stars from Michelin is a tall order to defend, and that the staff at The Restaurant at Meadowood strives to achieve higher highs every day. For Toulon, this means being on top of his game every single night.

"Our guests expect nothing less," he says. "Above all else, this challenge is what makes the job fun."

Meadwood Napa Valley Sommelier Rom Toulon, left, goes over a food and wine pairing before service with sous chef Poncho Vasquez in the kitchen of The Restaurant. J/L Sossi/Register photos

Rom Toulon, Meadowood Napa Valley sommelier, prepares to pour wine in a small room on the restaurant kitchen for an afternoon tasting.