

John Wabeck

Inox, Tysons Corner, Virginia

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AFTER YEARS IN THE KITCHEN, JOHN WABECK TRADED HIS TOQUE FOR A TASTEVIN.

Inox

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"I'm lucky this happened, or I'd still be cooking," admits the wine director for Inox restaurant in Tysons Corner, Va., a short drive from Washington, D.C. The restaurant, whose name comes from the French word *inoxidable*, or "stainless," boasts more than 650 labels in its 6,000-to-7,000-bottle "wine hall"—a long, narrow, temperature-controlled storage room for the contents of its Burgundy- and Rioja-focused list.

Wabeck has a particular penchant for Burgundies from Chambolle-Musigny and Vosne-Romanée. "Luckily, my job is pretty easy given that what I love, and love to sell, is Burgundy," he says, adding that Inox's cuisine pairs effortlessly with both the whites and reds of the region. But Wabeck isn't dogmatic about his preferences: "I'll honestly drink anything if it's well made and typical." His list also offers 20 wines by the glass, ranging from a \$5 Fino Sherry to a \$24 grower Champagne.

Wabeck recognized his passion for the grape while studying at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. After his graduation in 1992, the first 20 résumés he submitted were for sommelier positions. "Back in the day, a 24-year-old kid with no experience wasn't going to get a job like that, and I didn't," he explains. So he went to work in the kitchens of some of D.C.'s top restaurants, including Red Sage, 1789, and Restaurant Nora, where he rose to chef de cuisine.

The lure of California's wine country proved to be irresistible, however, and Wabeck was tapped in 2000 as executive chef of Napa's Brix.



A fan of European wines, he hadn't sipped many noteworthy California bottlings until he moved to the West Coast. Bobby Stuckey, MS, then sommelier at The French Laundry in Yountville, invited him to partake in staff tastings. Wabeck performed poorly at first, but quickly developed an aptitude by treating each liquid challenge like a golf swing, relying on skillful analysis rather than luck.

When Wabeck moved back to D.C. to open Bar Rouge and Firefly's Topaz Bar in 2001, a committed tasting group of Master Sommelier students proved to be the perfect environment in which to hone his blind-tasting skills. "For me, it started out as a personal goal," he says; "now it's a professional one as well. I study, as I don't have the years of professional experience as some do to fall back on." He's currently one of six MS candidates in the D.C. area.

By nature, Wabeck is quiet and reserved. As a chef, he confesses he was content to hide out

Photos courtesy of Inox restaurant



John Wabeck, wine director at Inox (left); Inox dining room (above).

in the kitchen, but as a sommelier, invisibility is now an impossibility. His shyness dissipates like the bubbles in Champagne when he talks shop, and he comes alive at the pop of a cork. “I can usually read tables pretty well,” he says. “If someone wants to talk wine, I can talk for hours. If not, then I’m here for suggestions.” Wabeck brings encouragement for the wine newbie, but he backs off from the expert who wants to test his chops with an esoteric question or obscure reference. (To quash an insufferable showoff, he casually mentions one of the domaines of Burgundy with which he is so familiar.) On the other hand, Inox’s location makes it attractive on weekdays to serious business diners, who often have neither the time nor the inclination to hear lengthy pairing suggestions or winery stories. In those instances, Wabeck speaks when spoken to. “We try to give them the experience they want,” he explains. “I’m pretty hard on myself if I talk too much to a table that doesn’t want it, or vice versa.”

Lovers of other beverages won’t find themselves alienated, either. “Beer and cocktails

work, and whiskey,” says Wabeck. “I like that stuff, too. I can usually make the connection on all of the above personalities.” Although Wabeck says he takes a “cooking approach” to his beverage program, that doesn’t extend to the “bar chef” title used to describe some modern mixologists. “Why reinvent the Manhattan?” he asks. As with a fine wine, he says, the elements of a good cocktail—alcohol, sweet, sour, and bitter—need to be balanced. And just as a chef wouldn’t oversauce or overseason a fresh fillet of fish, the main ingredient (the spirit) needs to stay front and center.

Guests who opt for the eight seats at the Inox Chef’s Wine Cellar tend to be the enthusiastic foodies and enophiles with whom Wabeck easily establishes rapport. Diners can watch the bustling kitchen through a pane of glass without the distractions of clattering pots and pans or chef Jon Mathieson’s orders to his staff. The ever-changing six-course tasting menu costs \$74, and an additional \$47 brings Wabeck’s wine pairings. A current favorite is the slow-cooked veal-cheek risotto and roasted porcini

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FIVE FAVORITES

Pewsey Vale Riesling The Contours Museum Release, Eden Valley, Australia

2003 \$68

It seems that all you can find in Aussie Riesling is the current release, so I'm always on the lookout for something with a bit of time on it. The extra couple of years tones down the nerviness, and it seems to do better with our cuisine, especially broth-based fish dishes.

López de Heredia Viña Tondonia Blanco Gran Reserva, Rioja, Spain

1981 \$178

I know everyone is jumping on this boat, but I've been in the tank with them for quite a while. There are only a few wines as unique as this, and it's not for everyone, or even a few people. That means more for me.

Domaine Robert Groffier Chambolle-Musigny Les Hauts-Doix, Burgundy, France

2001 \$229

For me, the village of Chambolle is the best in the world for Pinot. It's hard enough to find good Chambolle in Virginia, let alone something that drinks as well as this.

Felton Road Pinot Noir Calvert Vineyard, Central Otago, New Zealand

2007 \$145

This is like looking into a crystal ball to see how high the quality could go in New Zealand in 10 or 20 years. Sure, it's pure fruit, but who cares? I don't usually believe what I read, but when people say Felton Road is the best in New Zealand, I have to agree.

Domaine des Miquettes St. Joseph, Rhône Valley, France

2006 \$65

Can't say enough about this one: super-gamy, herbaceous, black-olive goodness. We almost always have Millbrook venison on our menu—a no-brainer pairing.

mushrooms, with which he recommends a Burgundy or a Nebbiolo—a simple pairing that shows they don't all have to be off the wall."

Beyond an aptitude for creating seamless matches for the cuisine, Wabeck's experience toiling in a hot, hustling kitchen has given him the ability to deal with pressure and the discipline to anticipate those rare, but inevitable, times when the well-oiled kitchen machine blows a gasket. "It's a serious crime to have wine arrive at the wrong time," he believes. "Having that little bit of intuition helps."

Although Wabeck is more apt to decant a vintage Port than to deglaze a sauté pan these days, his 25 years behind the stove have left an indelible impression that he carries with him to the floor every night. "The kitchen is the heart of the house," he says. "I won't forget that." 🍷

Inox bar.



WINE LIST EXCERPT

Red Burgundy

GRANDS CRUS

Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Richebourg	2006	\$1,490
Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, La Tâche	2006	\$1,700
Domaine Follin-Arbelet, Corton-Bressandes	2004	\$158
Domaine Harmand-Geoffroy, Mazis-Chambertin	2000	\$205
Domaine Hudelot-Baillet, Bonnes Mares	2005	\$300
Domaine J.J. Confuron, Romanée-Saint-Vivant	2004	\$510
Domaine Mongeard-Mugneret, Grands Echezeaux	2003	\$300
Domaine Naudin-Ferrand, Echezeaux	2000	\$230
Shaps & Roucher-Sarrazin, Clos Vougeot	2004	\$175
Vallet Frères, Chambertin	2003	\$320
Vallet Frères, Charmes-Chambertin (375 ml)	2003	\$105

CÔTES DE NUITS

GEVREY-CHAMBERTIN

Domaine Harmand-Geoffroy, La Perrière	2005	\$125
Domaine Jean-Michel Guillon, La Petite Chapelle	2002	\$165
Domaine Tortochot, Lavaux-Saint-Jacques	2005	\$130
Vallet Frères	2002	\$120

MOREY-SAINT-DENIS

Domaine Michel Magnien, Les Chaffots	2005	\$176
Domaine Patrice Cacheaux, Le Clos de l'Orme	2006	\$172
Domaine Tortochot	2005	\$76

VOSNE-ROMANÉE

Domaine Arnelle et Bernard Rion, Les Chaumes	2006	\$170
Domaine Jacques Cacheux (375 ml)	2005	\$62
Domaine Jacques Cacheux, Les Suchots	2005	\$182

CHAMBOLLE-MUSIGNY

Domaine Arnelle et Bernard Rion, Les Gruenchers	2005	\$138
Domaine Hudelot-Baillet, Les Charmes	2005	\$156
Domaine Felettig, Les Fuées	2005	\$145
Domaine J.J. Confuron	2006	\$125
Domaine Robert Groffier, Les Hauts-Doix	2001	\$229

NUITS-SAINT-GEORGES

Domaine Alain Michelot, "Vieilles Vignes"	2005	\$99
Domaine Chauvenet, Les Vaucrains (1.5 L)	2001	\$315
Domaine Daniel Rion, "Vieilles Vignes"	2005	\$188
Domaine Robert Chevillon	2004	\$121

CÔTES DE BEAUNE

POMMARD

Domaine Joseph Voillot, Clos Micault	2006	\$192
Domaine Michel Gaunoux, Les Grands Epenots	1996	\$180
Domaine Michel Gaunoux, Les Rugiens	1993	\$185

VOLNAY

Domaine Fontaine-Gagnard, Clos de Chênes (375 ml)	2005	\$82
Domaine François Mikulski, Blondeau "Hospices de Beaune"	2000	\$199
Domaine Joseph Voillot, Les Brouillards	2005	\$160
Domaine Joseph Voillot, "Vieilles Vignes"	2006	\$121
Domaine Nicolas Rossignol, Chevret	2005	\$155
Shaps & Roucher-Sarrazin, Les Santenots	2005	\$129

For Inox's complete wine list, click on the link in the online version of this article at www.sommelierjournal.com.