

Christopher Cooper

Soho House Group Sommelier, 33



Nobody tells you at school that you can be some sort of wine person. Wouldn't it be great if when you did that careers test at school it said, "And your chosen career is... sommelier!" I got started in the drink industry when I was at university in Australia, studying environmental science and working in a microbrewery. When I finished my degree I didn't really fancy being a park ranger so when I got back to the UK I was trying to work out what to do. I loved that I could taste different things in beer when I talked about beer. I knew a little bit about wine but I pretty much knew as much as most of the general public do.

Even so, I contacted the Gordon Ramsay restaurant and spoke to the then head sommelier, Ronan Sayburn, an English guy who's now working for the Hotel du Vin group. He liked the fact that I was enthusiastic and English and didn't really know very much but wanted to get involved. I started at as an entry level commis sommelier just as Gordon was opening up Claridge's and the Connaught. All I did was pour wine and run up and down fetching wines from the wine cellar and that's all I was allowed to do, I wasn't even allowed to talk to customers. It was hilarious because I had all these French sommeliers who were probably

the same age as me, if not slightly younger, screaming and shouting in French, telling me to get this bottle of Chablis, not that one, from this producer, not that one and it's not a Premier Cru it's a Grand Cru and I'm just going "What?". I'd have no idea what had just been said to me – obviously a steep learning curve! You learn very quickly otherwise you don't have a job. I guess it's like anything; riding a unicycle, juggling, art appreciation, the more you do something the better you become at it.

It took two or three years to become a sommelier. I didn't do any exams. I liked the fact

that you didn't have to sit in a classroom and listen to someone droning on about wine because I wouldn't have been able to learn like that. If you're learning in a restaurant and actually tasting the wines by the glass each time then your knowledge just goes up and up.

Next, I worked for Angela Hartnett at the Connaught and she was really cool. Then an opportunity came up when Marcus Wareing was at the Savoy Grill, and that was my first head sommelier position. Next I worked at St Alban, sister restaurant to the Wolseley at the time, with Chris Corbin and Jeremy King. It was an interesting restaurant and a complete eye opener and change of tack compared to the Michelin-starred nature of my job before. Then I went to work at Clos Maggiore in Covent Garden which has the fourth or fifth biggest wine list in London. Then I was approached by Stuart Gillies as they were opening up the Savoy Grill. I did that for a year and then this came up and I'm massively excited. Like a bartender, you learn your own style as a sommelier. I'm very relaxed and easy going and

I speak normally in very plain language about wine, rather than the flowery "wine speak" a lot of people have. I think that's what makes the way I teach about wine much more accessible - because it's not terrifying, you're not talking alien to people, you're not talking herbaceousness or descriptions about wine that just make people go 'whaaa..?'. Tell me what the wine tastes like! If you start doing a powerpoint presentation on wine, everyone's asleep within five minutes.

"Wine just excites me all the time"

Now my job is about all sorts of things as each site is so different. If you look at Pizza East compared to Cecconi's, compared to Soho House, compared to Shoreditch House or High Road House in Chiswick, they're all completely different so you really have to be site specific. There's food and wine matching, being in the restaurant, talking to the staff, generally being around as a point of contact so that people

can come to me. I'll be liaising with each GM, with each bartender or bar manager about how we can create the best wine selection for them and for their guests, working with them and the staff about how we can do the best training for each venue and how they can get the best out of me. We'll be doing more guest events as well - some really quirky, new, fun events, hopefully one every month or six weeks in each venue.

Wine just excites me all the time. It's always seen to be a bit of a stuffy subject and you always imagine gentlemen with beards and tweed jackets being all la-di-da. I don't think it's like that. It should be approachable and normal - it should be accessible to all and essentially that's what I've always been about.

The New Year is going to be a completely new dawn and we're going to really approach our wine selection and wine list completely differently. 2012 is our drinks year. It's our boozy year, so let's talk about wine, let's talk about cocktails and let's really get stuck in.



NEXT ISSUE CHRISTOPHER BEGINS A NEW REGULAR WINE COLUMN. HERE'S A TASTER FOR NOW

Christopher Cooper – what's on in 2012

The wishful thinkers among us may be determinedly sticking to their New Year regimes of detox and healthy living in the vain hope of eternally committing to a more youthful and fresher them. But for those hoping for support - be disappointed: the coming year you'll be under the growing pressure of our refreshed and renewed wine and drinks offerings. Repolished and revamped we'll be, with an attention to detail in quality and price. The wine lists and staff at your favourite places are hungrier than ever to deliver you great wines. We'll be fighting your corner for what you really want...a decent glass of grog.

Revived also will be the wine club but in a more exciting guise: the events team and I will be putting our creative thinking caps on (we are most inspired during the haze of festive frivolity and holiday indulgences) and coming up with amazing and heady themes... watch this space everyone (and the infinite space that is our online presence).

The road is a long one and the journey is fraught with confusion and flannel, but I'm here now to create clarity and passion in every bar, restaurant, guest house and townhouse in your area.

Cheers all to a prosperous 2012

C.