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**SOMMELIER**

## Selling the cellar: Life behind the corkscrew

Top sommelier Terry Threlfall pours out his heart on why he loves working with wine

**BY MIA STAINSBY**  
VANCOUVER SUN

**“W**e’re geeky. Just ask any question you’ve ever wanted to ask about wine,” says Terry Threlfall.

That, in fact, could be the sommelier motto.

“We just love wine and their stories,” says Threlfall, an internationally recognized sommelier and head sommelier at Hawksworth restaurant.

He owns more wine books than most libraries and like most sommeliers, he works wicked hours, hours that single guys should be on the drinking – not the pouring – side of wine.

“I usually come in at 10, 10:15 in the morning and work to 1 or 2 a.m.,” he says. “I work long, gruelling hours but the perks are fantastic. Last week, I worked seven days.” And forget about weekends off. Being single often comes with the territory.

“I work unsociable hours – evenings for the most part. I sleep on my days off. You have to have that drive and love of wine.”

Before taking the job at Hawksworth (which employs five sommeliers and is about to hire a sixth), Threlfall headed the wine program at London’s Chez Bruce, which has won awards for best overall wine establishment and European wine restaurant and the one-Michelin-star restaurant has been voted the best restaurant in London for seven years by Harden’s Guide.

Threlfall has been a wine panelist for *Decanter* magazine and a judge for Decanter World Wine Awards. He’s also been the Vancouver Playhouse International Wine Festival sommelier for 11 years, overseeing volunteer sommeliers and organizing 20 to 25 tasting events put on by the Festival.

In London, he worked briefly for a restaurant owned by actor Roger Moore (now closed), which was a celebrity hangout. “No one bats an eye at celebrities in London,” Threlfall says, but he was humbled by one guest – Mikhail Gorbachev. “Amazing,” he says of meeting him.

Threlfall’s career began with his love of food and wine locally, working in restaurants through high school, including being a maitre d’ at Sutton Place Hotel by the time he was 19. “I loved the business,” he says. “I loved the part about providing great service and seeing people leave extremely happy.”

The Hawksworth cellar has 4,500 bottles and 340 to 350 labels. “I don’t want a massive wine list that takes forever to go through. It’s fluid and always changing and interesting to read,” he says. As well as the regular wine list, the restaurant offers a changing fresh sheet of wines by the bottle, half bottle, carafe, glass and taster size [2.5 ounces]. “We change

two or three wines a day. It makes the job exciting and fun. And we'll pretty much open anything on the list. We have one guest who ordered an expensive cab and drank it incrementally, over three weeks. It was his own personal bottle." (The Cruvinet wine preserving system keeps opened wine fresh for three weeks.)

The cellar matches Hawksworth's food. "David [Hawksworth] made a conscious effort to lighten up the dishes quite a bit. At West [where Threlfall work with Hawksworth when he was executive chef], it was rich, European-inspired food. He wanted lighter fare with Asian flavours and for people to leave light and fresh, so I did the same with the wine list. I have a ton of Pinot noirs, Gamay noirs and I'm having fun with B.C. whites as well."

A sommelier's wine knowledge is nothing, he says, without people skills and an honest desire to make them happy.

"You check your ego at the door and try to please as many people as you can," he says, when asked about difficult personalities. "I've had guests in the past who don't like the menu and don't like the wine list because it doesn't have Yellowtail Shiraz," he says. "The key to this industry is diplomacy. We try to get to the base of the problem. We explain. We come to a

compromise.

"You can know a lot about wine but if you don't know how to deal with customers and love it, it can be frustrating. It doesn't matter how much you know. A lot of guys want a big Napa cab that blows your brains out with a delicate crab starter. It's not going to be a perfect match but if he's enjoying it, that's fine."

He says markups vary but he tries to keep them reasonable. "It depends on the bottle, but comparatively, we look good. We're reasonable," he says. Oenophiles know he's got some real deals on his list. "Those might have a \$10 mark-up. They're left field wines and have a lesser mark-up. I strongly believe you have to give value. I don't believe in pressure or upselling. It's about reading the customer.

Vancouver, he says, has the highest concentration of passionate, informed wine people on Earth. "It's amazing. They are so well-trained and so well-informed."

The days of the snooty sommelier or wine steward are over, he says, even in London, where he once wore a vest, a pompous tastevin and bow tie around his neck. "I felt like an idiot. Even there, over the last six, seven years, a group of sommeliers really decided people don't want that kind of service any more. One sommelier trained up a ton of young ones who are leading



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the charge. It's become a vibrant and exciting community. It's most unfortunate, that intimidating reputation."

Nothing pleases Threlfall more than to work with guests who love to experiment and learn. "We'll talk about the wine and its history, how it might be from a small village in Sicily, how they plant their vines, how they drink the wine in Sicily – the whole story.

Story is a big part of it. There's one behind every wine. It's such a romantic beverage.

"And when a dish is in perfect harmony with the wine, it elevates both the wine and the dish," he says, explaining his *raison d'être*.

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