

The Making of a Grand Wine Cellar



At the new **Addison** restaurant at The Grand Del Mar resort outside San Diego, head sommelier Jesse Rodriguez has put together a remarkable wine list. **John Mariani** talks with him about that experience and gets advice on starting a collection at home

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SHELLEY METCALF

WHEN JESSE RODRIGUEZ WAS HIRED AS head sommelier at Addison, the beautiful new \$15 million restaurant on the grounds of The Grand Del Mar resort outside San Diego, his directives were “pretty simple,” he says. “Make it awesome, and here’s \$1 million to start.”

Such largesse is rare anywhere—at a three-star hotel dining room in Paris, at a posh restaurant in New York, or even at a spare-no-expense casino wine cellar in Vegas. But the developers of The Grand Del Mar wanted nothing but the very best in every detail, including a wine cellar worthy of a prestigious Grand Award

from *Wine Spectator* magazine, an honor currently held by only 76 restaurants in the world. After less than one year in operation, the Addison garnered the *Spectator*’s “Best of Award of Excellence,” one tier from the top prize.

Rodriguez, who has worked at the illustrious French Laundry in Napa Valley and the Phoenician in Phoenix, took to his new task with giddy delight, assembling a list of more than 3,000 selections and more than 20,000 bottles, with 350 half-bottles and more than 60 wines offered nightly by the glass. There is very little that even the most demanding

connoisseur will find missing from Addison’s list, which includes multiple vintages of hard-to-find California “cult” wines, such as Screaming Eagle, Diamond Creek, and Dominus, along with rarities such as Penfolds Grange from Australia, Krug Clos du Mesnil Champagne, and the celebrated wines of Piedmont winemaker Angelo Gaja.

With selections starting at \$20, the list won’t intimidate the average wine lover. But you can spend as much as \$16,480 a bottle if you’re feeling pretty flush.

The restaurant itself, named after Florida architect Addison Mizner, evokes

Head sommelier Jesse Rodriguez (right) and chef William Bradley collaborate for excellent food-and-wine pairings at Addison.

Below, left to right: Bradley whips up his inspired cuisine. In 2007, after less than a year in operation, Addison garnered the *Wine Spectator's* "Best of Award of Excellence." A barkeep prepares for the evening crowd.



images of grand villas on the Mediterranean, with its Venetian plastered walls, stone flooring, archways, carved stone columns, a sexy bar, and a dining room that opens to the golf course and Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve. Addison's brilliant young chef, William Bradley, has crafted a menu of exceptional refinement based on only three or four elements in perfect harmony, such as his classic lamb *persillé* with warm goat cheese-and-leek tart and a tangy lemon-sorrel salad.


"The chef and I speak all the time about the ideal wines to pair with his food," says Rodriguez. "He is open to adjusting his progression with the food the same way I am with the wine. We determine what looks best for the guests and move in that direction."

To this end, Addison hosts half a dozen

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prestigious wine dinners each year, with a winemaker or winery owner as the guest speaker. Rodriguez is also attentive to his guests' desire to discuss wines. "I might be very involved with a guest's wine selection and introduce him or her to new wines, or I might stay in the background and simply pour the wine," he says. "It's really about gauging someone's

interest in being interactive. I also try to sense how much they want to spend. I give them a parameter by pointing to a wine and its price on the list, and then show them another. That way, you don't blow their cover. Guests usually appreciate that and will tell you yes, no, or go higher!" With a list like Addison's, the sky would seem to be the only limit.  5200 Grand Del Mar Way, San Diego, 858/314-1900, www.addisondelmar.com.

STOCKING WINES AT HOME

Although Jesse Rodriguez had \$1 million to play with, he still has some practical advice for anyone interested in going beyond stocking a few bottles.

"First, buy what you like to drink," he says. "Select wines that you can enjoy on a daily basis, once a week, once a month, and once a year. This way, you can have a multitiered cellar that makes for well-rounded selections. If you are looking to stock a cellar with 100 bottles, make 25 of those wines that you can open daily, 25 that you will open once a week, 25 for once a month, and 25 for once-a-year occasions."

Are temperature-controlled units essential? For the occasional inexpensive bottle, no. But for a collection, "they are necessary," says Rodriguez. "They provide you with the confidence that the wines are housed properly. You might consider converting an area of your house into a cellar. Buy a cooling unit and racks that will allow you to house your bottles properly; it's more about functionality than looks. If, however, you are looking to display those gems, consider a wine refrigerator that can double as a credenza."