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ON WINE

How Wine Fits Into the New Normal

Under ordinary circumstances, beverage director Andy Myers oversees what's poured at José Andrés's celebrated restaurant group. Now he's pivoting to serve his community and appreciating the beauty of a \$6 bottle.



TOAST MASTER Andy Myers oversees wine and beverage for the D.C.-based ThinkFoodGroup.

ILLUSTRATION: COSMIKDUST



By

[Lettie Teague](#)

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WHY WOULD ANYONE want to talk about wine right now?” When Andy Myers put this question to me a few weeks ago, I understood it as rhetorical—but I’ve been pondering my response ever since.

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Is it even right to talk about wine right now? Join the conversation below.

Mr. Myers is the beverage director of ThinkFoodGroup, the collection of 28 restaurants in eight U.S. states and the Bahamas owned by the Spanish American chef José Andrés. I’d called to find out how wine professionals like him have been coping with the recent upending of the restaurant world. Since Mr. Myers works for, arguably, the world’s most famous chef-humanitarian, I figured he might offer an interesting perspective on dealing with the catastrophic effects of wholesale restaurant closures in the face of the coronavirus crisis.

Mr. Myers is one of the few beverage directors still working right now: So many restaurant wine personnel around the country have been furloughed or simply let go. In fact, Mr. Myers told me, Mr. Andrés managed to keep every single one of his 1,600 restaurant staffers employed until April 20. He has since had to temporarily furlough some hourly staff (with full benefits).

Drinking an expensive bottle of wine just doesn’t seem appropriate to him right now.

When we talked, Mr. Myers was preparing for his shift at Jaleo restaurant in Washington, D.C., one of the six restaurants ThinkFoodGroup has converted to community kitchens, serving food to anyone in need of a meal. Patrons include school children, senior citizens and the unemployed. Some pay for their meals, but the vast majority receive them free of charge. Mr. Myers estimated that only 10% of the tens of thousands they’ve served are paying clientele.

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The community kitchens are among a host of charitable initiatives spearheaded by Mr. Andrés. He's also founder of World Central Kitchen, a nonprofit organization created 10 years ago to combat global hunger. While the role that Mr. Andrés's kitchen staff would play in his efforts to feed the hungry during the pandemic became clear early on, it wasn't immediately obvious how the beverage team could help the cause. Mr. Myers spent some agonizing empty days trying to figure that out. "You can't work for José and not want to jump in," he said.

He concluded it meant pitching in wherever help was needed at the community kitchens: setting up tables, preparing to-go bags of meals and cleaning up afterward, attired in protective gear. (Mr. Myers made his own special mask to cover his beard.) The community kitchens offer packaged meals free between 12 and 4 p.m. seven days a week. From 4 to 8 p.m. (9 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays), the kitchens focus on takeout and delivery orders for paying customers—though, Mr. Myers noted, they hand out quite a few free meals during those hours too.

In the beginning the restaurants were only offering food, but Mr. Myers and the beverage team soon got to work creating a limited selection of prepared cocktails and inexpensive bottles of red and white wines such as the 2016 Alvaro Palacios La Montesa Rioja (\$20) and Raventós i Blanc Cuvée José (\$20) to sell as well. The team also opened "bodegas" in several restaurant locations in D.C., selling wine as well as hand sanitizer, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, bread, eggs and pantry items.

Mr. Myers has worked with Mr. Andrés for nearly six years, and they have known one another far longer, having both been fixtures on the D.C. restaurant scene for some time. Before signing on with ThinkFoodGroup, Mr. Myers spent almost a decade as the sommelier at the now-defunct CityZen, in the Mandarin Oriental hotel. During that time he earned his Master Sommelier (MS) certification from the Court of Master Sommeliers, the result of long study and a series of rigorous exams. None of which could possibly have prepared him for the crisis at hand. "I've spent 25 years being an expert on something that isn't needed right now," he noted ruefully.

Still, it was his expertise that brought him to ThinkFoodGroup, where he continues to come up with new ways to support customers as they isolate at home. When Mr. Myers joined the company he was much more conversant with French wines than he was with Spanish ones. But since Mr. Andrés acts as a de facto ambassador for his native land, Mr. Myers's appreciation of Iberian reds and whites has increased exponentially.

In recent years, he's even become a bit of an evangelist for Cava, the Spanish sparkling wine, which he regards as superior to its more widely known Italian counterpart. "Prosecco has done a much better job of marketing itself as playful and fun," he said. As beverage director he has worked to give Cava a similar boost in profile.

He has also become particularly enamored of wines made from Mencía, the red grape of northwest Spain. He likened the grape to Pinot Noir for its lightness, “lithe nature” and low alcohol. All of those qualities make the grape “incredibly food-friendly,” he explained. Yet unlike most Pinot Noirs, Mencía wines are typically quite reasonably priced. “It’s hard to find an expensive one. It’s like Burgundy you can afford to drink,” he said. “No one can afford to drink Burgundy anymore.”

Like many oenophiles during this crisis, Mr. Myers has been drinking fairly basic wines at home. It’s partly because his collectible bottles are in off-site storage and he does not have a car, and also because drinking an expensive bottle of wine just doesn’t seem appropriate to him right now. He recently purchased a couple cases of Katogi Averoff Xinomavro, a Greek red he described as a “simple” wine that “costs me about \$6 a bottle.”

The fanciest, or at least the most festive, bottles that Mr. Myers has selected for himself recently include the 2002 Billecart-Salmon Champagne and the 2010 Raventós i Blanc Manuel Raventós, a Spanish sparkling wine. He opened them both to mark his March 29 marriage to Chelsea Engh, a bartender currently furloughed from her job at the Anthem, a concert venue. Like many engaged couples with weddings scheduled to take place during this crisis, Ms. Engh and Mr. Myers postponed their big celebration. But they decided to proceed with the ceremony itself. A friend officiated—at a safe social distance—at the end of their neighbor’s driveway.

When better days finally arrive, Mr. Myers plans to celebrate his wedding properly, with friends and a big party. And he hopes to make some changes in his work life as well. For one, he’d like spend less time with spreadsheets and more time with people, working on the restaurant floor like he did when he was a sommelier. “I want to feel the emotional rush of connecting with someone,” he said. “Even if it’s just a table of two, there is the potential of changing their night.”

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