

Care to See the Wine List?

Yes, you do, at these all-star cellars across greater Palm Springs.

LIZBETH SCORDO / JANUARY 3, 2019 / CURRENT PSL, RESTAURANTS



Noe Maldonado from Mastro's Palm Desert holds a bottle of Daou Cabernet Sauvignon.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATE ABBOTT

Whether you're a die-hard oenophile or simply enjoy a good glass with dinner, you've probably never read a restaurant wine list cover to cover.

Instead, you likely jump to a varietal, region, or producer you like, or ask the server or sommelier for a recommendation.

But at many Coachella Valley restaurants, the lists are so painstakingly curated that you might want to take home a copy for bedtime reading. Full of cult wines, notable names, rare vintages, and bottles with price tags on par with some pre-owned cars, the offerings are equally innovative and impressive.

Palm Springs Life spoke with the experts behind these lists to find out how they decide which bottles make the cut, how they procure hard-to-find favorites, and why their big-ticket bottles are worth the price.

WALLY'S DESERT TURTLE, RANCHO MIRAGE

Total Selections: 200

Average Bottle Price:

\$70

Priciest Bottle on the

Current List: 1990

Château Mouton

Rothschild, Pauillac,

Bordeaux, France, \$1,475

Times have changed since Wally's Desert Turtle opened its doors more than four decades ago ... and so has the wine list.

"Back then we had strong French influences with the original French chef who opened with my dad and was here for 25 years," says Michael Botello, who now owns and operates the restaurant with his wife, Nicole.

"The Swiss manager and wine buyer focused on French wines, but then as time went on, we started to focus more on California wines because we find that's a big part of what our customers want."



Michael and Nicole Botello offer old-world wines at Wally's Desert Turtle, but California varietals are most popular.

The current dinner menu straddles both French classics (escargot in the shell and Dover sole meunière, for example) and California contemporary fare (think heirloom tomatoes with microbasil and burrata), and today California chardonnay and cabernet have become the restaurant's most requested varietals, with top-sellers including the 2016 Rombauer chardonnay (\$62) and a 2014 Chateau Montelena cabernet (\$90).

But the restaurant still offers plenty of old-world wines, including many high-end (and high-priced) French selections like a 1988 Château Haut-Brion Cru Classé (\$1,100) and Château Mouton Rothschild from both the 1989 and 1990 vintages (at \$1,100 and \$1,475 respectively), all of which become more difficult to procure with each passing year.

"We evaluate the list and adjust the prices annually based on the availability on the market," Botello explains. "They get more valuable as time goes on. So it's usually someone who is very sophisticated and knows the wine who comes in and says, 'Oh you've got an '89 Rothschild? I can't even find that anymore.' And that entices them to buy a bottle."

MASTRO'S PALM DESERT

Total Selections: 430

Average Bottle Price:
\$200

**Priciest Bottle on the
Current List:** 2001
Château Pétrus,
Pomerol, France, \$4,350

This steakhouse on El Paseo shares about 70 percent of its wine list selections with Mastro's



Rebecca Elliott and Noe Maldonado tune the Mastro's wine list to the tastes of diners in the desert.

other 16 locations around the country for consistency. As for the remaining 30 percent,

that's where the Palm Desert team, including general manager Rebecca Elliott and wine director Noe Maldonado, both of whom have been here since the restaurant opened in 2012, come in, updating the offerings a few times a year.

“We’ve seen the wine list grow and evolve, and we choose wines that do well in our market,” says Elliott, noting that many guests have a penchant for Napa Valley and the surrounding American Viticultural Areas that influence the menu. And while those cabs pair well with Mastro’s signature fare — steak — she insists that the die-hard days of reds with meat and white with seafood are over, adding that pinot noir plays well with both, and she often recommends a rosé with Mastro’s steak tartare appetizer.

Bottles exclusive to the Palm Desert location often have a story — like the 2013 GoGi 3 Bings Santa Rita Hills pinot noir (\$170) made by Kurt Russell, who has a residence here. The 2012 Bryant Family Bettina from Napa (\$1,000) is a blend with a limited allocation that Elliott was introduced to via a private tasting. Despite the high price tag, the restaurant sells about two or three of them a month and tries to keep around eight on hand at a time.

And if you’re wondering about that Château Pétrus (the priciest bottle on any list in this story), well, no takers ... yet. “It’s the original bottle that we’ve had since opening,” she shares. “We try not to touch it. We let it rest while it waits for the right guest.”



Noe Maldonado from Mastro's Palm Desert.

MORGAN'S IN THE DESERT, LA QUINTA

Total Selections: 130

Average Bottle Price: \$100

Priciest Bottle on the Current List:

ZD Abacus XVI, Napa Valley, \$1,200

Outside of its solid French champagne selection, the list at this farm-to-table resort restaurant is firmly planted in its home state, with around 100 of the offerings, including almost every one of its 35 cabernets, sourced from California.

“The concept at Morgan’s is modern Californian cuisine with a focus on locally sourced ingredients, so we focus on California wines too, which ties in with the cuisine,” says Halil Nalci, assistant director of food and beverage at La Quinta Resort & Club.

Nalci’s most recent list revamp boosted its selection of high-end Napa wines with strong name recognition — labels like Turnbull, Caymus, and Alexander Valley’s Silver Oak. And it now offers three different vintages of the heavyweight blend Opus One, with bottles from 2013, 2014, and 2015 (\$550–\$850).



Halil Nalci recently revised the list at Morgan’s in the desert to widen the selection of Napa wines.

Nalci has also sprinkled in bottles from some select smaller producers well-known in the wine world including a Mi Sueño Los Carneros chardonnay (\$70), only offered in a mere 430 cases a year, and a 2015 cabernet from Pride Mountain Vineyards (\$152), which sits on the Napa and Sonoma border and produces less than 650 bottles of that wine annually.

“I keep myself educated,” says Nalci about the process of deciding what stays and what goes during list updates. “I’m meeting with distributors on a weekly basis, and they’re introducing me to new wines.”

Then there’s a smattering of offerings in the “unique” white and red categories for those ready to explore, say, an albariño made in Napa rather than Spain or a German gewürztraminer. Says Nalci: “It’s a chance to introduce guests to wines that they might not have tried or even heard of.”



THE EDGE STEAKHOUSE, RANCHO MIRAGE



Cabernet is king at The Edge Steakhouse, where sommelier Paul Bologna updates the wine list daily.

Total Selections: 250

Average Bottle Price: \$200

Priciest Bottle on the Current List: 2005 Château Latour, Pauillac, Bordeaux, France, \$1,200

You know that feeling when your whole table finally agrees on which bottle to order only to have the server inform you that it's no longer available? Paul Bologna, sommelier for The Ritz-Carlton, Rancho Mirage does too, and he does not let it happen on his watch. That means he updates The Edge's list every single day, even to make a single adjustment. "If one wine changes from a 2015 to a 2016, I make that change because I want to make sure the list is 100 percent accurate, 100 percent of the time."

How the wine offerings skew regionally depends on time of year. During the off-season, when the property is heavy on visitors from Southern California, it sells more California wines. But from November to March, “I sell the old-world wines,” Bologna says. “That’s when people want first-growth Bordeaux. They’re spending an insane amount of money to come here, and they’re open to wines from all around the world, and they want the best.”

His selection strategy centers around exclusive small-batch and rare wines. Guests looking for a California chardonnay, for example, will find a 2016 ZD Estate Reserve from Napa Valley (\$135); Bologna only receives six per year. He also offers California cult favorites like Paul Hobbs Beckstoffer Tokalon from Napa Valley’s Oakville AVA (\$550). “I’m trying to give people access to wines that they normally cannot find,” he adds.

The old saying “cab is king” rings true here; it’s the varietal that people most associate with steak and a go-to special occasion pick. Given that The Edge is one of the most expensive restaurants in the Coachella Valley — with its \$180 Japanese A5 wagyu strip and Golden Osetra caviar service at \$200 an ounce — it gets its fair share of celebrations.

“I often buy California cabs that are older from auctions so I appeal to the nostalgia factor. I get some of the great vintages of the ’80s and ’90s from the wineries people knew back then. And



Cabernet is king at The Edge Steakhouse.

they're always a hit," he says.

"Sometimes I can only get two or three at a time, so I'm trying to order those every month."

When it comes to French Bordeaux, 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015 remain the top-rated vintages of the last 20 years, so Bologna fills the category with bottles like a 2010 Château Rauzan-Ségla from Margaux (\$275) and that 2005 Château Latour. "Those are the only ones I'm going to buy. Those are the best and those are ones that sell."