



Wine Service in The President's House

By Dick Rosano

December 2000/January 2001

The guard is changing at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and as the new administration settles in, all eyes will again be focused on The White House. It is an auspicious time for our nation's most storied residence, which celebrated its bicentennial in November. Not only will the new president bring his own vision and policies to the 200-year-old estate, but his personal sense of style will influence the manner in which visitors and dignitaries are entertained.

The President's House, as The White House was known in 1800, was designed under the direction of George Washington (although he never slept there) to showcase the majesty of the new republic. It was expected to look and function like an imperial residence, entertaining visiting dignitaries in lavish fashion and dazzling citizens with its grandeur. Parties were expected to feature the best food and the finest wine, and it was hoped that guests would leave with unforgettable memories of their time spent in the company of America's First Family.

Over the course of two centuries, the house has changed greatly, but its role has not. An invitation to a White House social event still holds the promise of exquisite cuisine and superb hospitality. For White House officials, however, modern-day state functions present even greater social and political challenges.

In less lofty settings, hosts generally choose the wine they serve based on its affinity for the food on the menu. But protocol prevents The White House from being so straightforward. Wines chosen for service at state dinners must pass tests more exacting than those of the palate - given the difficulties and potential pitfalls of catering to kings, queens, ambassadors and the occasional emperor.

When planning the menu pairings, the guest of honor's religious affiliation, cultural traditions and dietary habits are considered. And because only American wines are served at official White House functions, selecting a bottling that both accommodates the menu and honors the guest is what turns the otherwise simple process of wine pairing into an affair of state.

The challenge is managed by a small staff of experts inside and outside The White House. Presently, three men jointly plan the menus for the many state functions held at The White House every year.

"With the range of wines we have in our national cornucopia," says Daniel Shanks, who was hired in 1995 to serve as The White House's assistant usher, "we can satisfy any set of circumstances."

Because it is imperative not to embarrass a visiting dignitary, sometimes the perfect match must be sacrificed in favor of making the politically correct pairing. Shanks, who was formerly the manager at Napa Valley's Domaine Chandon restaurant, must therefore carefully tiptoe through the minefield of potential wine choices that might suggest a slight or insult. A wine made from a grape with a certain geographic heritage, for example, or one made by someone with a particular ethnic background, might be interpreted as an intentional comment about the guest's politics. Imagine the repercussions were a California "Champagne" served to a French diplomat? In The White House, such gaffes would be more damaging than serving a corked wine, and must be avoided at all costs.

Wine service at The White House did not always cater so strictly to guests. For many years, it was selected to suit the wine tastes of the sitting president.

Washington's plan for The President's House was grand, with its Palladian architecture and Empire furniture. Its floor plan closely resembled that of his beloved Mt. Vernon, but he did not live to see the mansion completed. Washington left office in 1797 and died two years later. The first president to sleep under its roof was his successor, John Adams, who moved in November 1, 1800, in the waning days of his single term. He and his wife, Abigail, had little time for the niceties of entertaining, however. Like most of the buildings surrounding it, the mansion was raw and unfinished - the East Room was even used by Mrs. Adams for hanging the family laundry up to dry.

Adams was succeeded by the urbane Thomas Jefferson, who occupied the residence from 1801 through 1809. Jefferson moved swiftly to grace the President's House with all the trappings of the leader of a great new country, including stocking it with fine wines from around the world. Jefferson's Williamsburg education and worldly ways imbued him with a predisposition for the pleasures of the palate, and his extensive travels throughout France and Italy in the 1780s made him a student of wine.

When he ascended to the presidency, Jefferson had wine vaults constructed below the east colonnade to house his sizable collection. (The area is no longer used for that purpose.) He is said to have spent more than \$11,000 on wine during his two terms as president, a sum that in today's economy would equal roughly \$175,000.

Jefferson was a gracious host, regularly dipping into his private collection to entertain foreign dignitaries, as well as his colleagues and opponents, in high style. In Jefferson's day, presidents didn't have expense accounts, but rather were expected to run the household from their own

salary. Indeed, it is said that Jefferson was generous to a fault, entertaining so lavishly that financial problems would follow him to his grave.

Today there is no official White House wine cellar because wines are procured for specific events and not stored for the later enjoyment of the president. Although Jefferson's overt enthusiasm for wine faded over the decades, The White House has recently been serving a broad range of American wines with pride to its international guests. But due to the political influence of service, selection of wine is intended to be subtle and seamless, rather than ostentatious.

Ever since Jefferson's time, wine service in The White House has echoed the country's attitude toward the beverage. Records surviving from 1845 document an extravagant meal, a formal, four-hour affair, that featured a flight of six wines - including pink Champagne, ruby Port and Sauternes - served by the expansive Sarah Polk, wife of President James K. Polk. But by the 1870s, when Rutherford B. Hayes was president, the Women's Temperance Movement was gaining momentum, and First Lady Lucy Webb Hayes banned wine and liquor service in The White House. Ironically, no ban existed during Prohibition, according to anecdotal records of liquor being served by Herbert Hoover during his presidency (1929-1933).

In the early 1960s, when John Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline, occupied The White House, French wine was very much in vogue. The Kennedys preferred Bordeaux.

And while Lyndon Johnson was hardly a wine aficionado, the most important political decision made about wine in the modern day White House was made under his watch when it was decided that only American wines would be served at official functions. It has been so ever since.

Richard Nixon therefore had no choice but to quaff his favorite French Champagne privately, but the savvy California native made a point of publicly toasting foreign dignitaries with his home state's sparkling wine. Gerald Ford also displayed his regional bias, but the wines of Michigan didn't make nearly as big a splash.

By the late 1970s, Jimmy Carter had banned the service of hard liquor under his roof, but he and his wife, Rosalyn, willingly served wine at state dinners to match the tastes of their guests.

As a former California governor, Ronald Reagan preferred California wines, and they were served liberally during his eight-year tenure in the 1980s.

Surprisingly, from the Kennedy era through the George Herbert Walker Bush administration, the cuisine at The White House remained decidedly French. It wasn't until the early 1990s that President and Mrs. Clinton decided to shift the menu, appropriately, toward regional American cuisine.

To accomplish this transition, they hired the talented Chef Walter Scheib, formerly the executive chef at the celebrated Greenbrier Resort in neighboring Virginia.

It was at this time that Scheib's culinary counterpart, Daniel Shanks, was brought in to orchestrate the wine selections among other duties.

Shanks, a Washington-area native, was interviewed three times for the job, including a meeting with Mrs. Clinton. He ultimately landed the job of assistant usher. In addition to his usher's duties, Shanks' wine expertise put him in a position to guide the selection of wines for state functions.

As for Scheib, he is renowned for his ample working knowledge of American culinary trends, and has clearly proven to be a feather in The White House's proverbial cap by fulfilling the administration's desire to serve inspired and authentic American regional cuisine.

When Scheib is informed of an event, he designs a menu in consultation with the First Lady's office. Together they draft a menu, then Scheib prepares samples of the suggested dishes. These are tasted, tested, then tasted again, by the chef's staff as well as members of the President's family and staff. The menu is relayed to the Chief Usher's office, whose staff manages all of the official functions hosted at The White House. The current chief usher, Gary Walters, has been a member of The White House staff since 1986. Because he was retained for reasons other than his wine knowledge, he turns over the final menu to Shanks who adds the finishing touches.

The first consideration is flavor. Shanks often confers with David Berkley, a wine purveyor from Sacramento, California, who began volunteering his advice for wine selection in The White House during the Reagan era. Berkley is consulted about preliminary selections, and tastings are conducted.

As would be expected for formal White House functions, the wines served are examined and re-examined, for flavor, food affinity and political correctness. The finalists are run by the chef for his seal of approval, too. "I go to Walter [Scheib] for insight or just to run my ideas past him," Shanks says. Once he receives Scheib's blessing, Shanks finalizes the pairings and adds the wines to the menu.

Shanks and Berkley strive to select wines that bring a dimension of symbolism to the table.

When Poland's Lech Walesa visited in 1994, for instance, the wines of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars were served by the Clinton administration because they were made by Warren Winiarski, an American vintner with a Polish ancestry. Similarly, when Romano Prodi, president of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Italy, joined the Clintons for dinner in 1998, American wines made from Italian varieties elevated the occasion: a Ponzi Arneis from Oregon, a Horton Nebbiolo from Virginia, followed by a Pecota Moscato d'Andrea from California.

When The White House wants to pay tribute to Thomas Jefferson, Virginia wines, a category that has made huge quality strides over the last decade, often punctuate the menu. "We serve Virginia wines as a valuable addition on their own merit," Shanks says, "not as historical gimmicks."

At recent state dinners, an array of American wines have been served.

On May 22, the Clintons honored His Excellency Thabo Mbeki, president of the Republic of South Africa, and Mrs. Mbeki. A 1999 Long Vineyard Pinot Grigio was served with green and white asparagus with wild leeks, morels and new potatoes. (Zelma Long owns the California winery, but has purchased vineyard land in South Africa.) A 1996 Chimney Rock Elevage was paired with the apricot-ginger glazed lamb entree with saffron pistachio couscous and herbed spring vegetables. (Chimney Rock owner Hack Wilson once lived in South Africa.)

On June 20, the Clintons hosted His Majesty Mohammed VI, King of Morocco and Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Meryem. A 1997 Justin Isosceles was matched with a main course of lemon garlic-crusted lamb with a balsamic glazed vidalia onion casserole. The Moroccan-themed dessert of oranges and dates in a honey mint sauce was served with a 1996 Argyle Blanc de Blancs.

When a visiting dignitary says his goodnights, every staff member shares the hope of the President and First Lady: that they have honored their country by doing an excellent job receiving, entertaining and feeding their distinguished guests. The White House represents all of America. Dining there can be a deeply moving and memorable experience. But it is also, perhaps, the only venue in which serving the wrong wine could cause a national embarrassment.

Recently, The White House celebrated its 200th anniversary, and a special dinner was served to commemorate the occasion. Over two centuries, since John Adams moved into the house that Washington built, thousands of corks have been pulled and scores of toasts made. During that time, administrations have come and gone, but wine has retained its role as the ultimate, enduring diplomat.

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