

By [LETTIE TEAGUE](#)

"There are days when I drink only water; those are the days that follow the nights when I've had too much wine," chef Alain Ducasse said to me soon after we met. What kind of night was last night, I wondered. I didn't have to wonder long. "Today is a Champagne day," he declared.

Chef Ducasse (no one calls him "Mister") and I met for lunch at Benoit, one of 22 Ducasse restaurants around the world and one of his two in New York. Benoit is the casual counterpart to his more formal Adour in the St. Regis Hotel, which, in turn, is nowhere near as fancy as his Michelin three-star restaurants in London, Paris and Monaco. (Although he was born in France, Chef Ducasse became a citizen of Monaco about three years ago.)

Chef Ducasse had been in New York for less than 24 hours by the time of our meeting and was slated to leave again very soon. When your empire is scattered all over the world, you can't stay in one place for very long. He estimated that he was in an airplane at least "once or twice a week" on trips to his various restaurants and hotels in London, Paris, Monaco and Las Vegas—not to mention Italy, Japan, China and the island of Mauritius off the southeast African coast.

Did he ever drink wine on airplanes? "It is the exception," Chef Ducasse said. (Sometimes he answered my questions in English and sometimes he spoke to his communications manager Sonia Toulouse, who translated his French.) Chef Ducasse recalled drinking some Krug Champagne recently en route from London to Tokyo. "The Asian airlines have the best wine programs," he said.

Our lunch began with glasses of Paul Goerg Rosé nonvintage Champagne, a lovely wine from a cooperative of growers. Chef Ducasse is a self-declared Champagne lover and has a private-label Champagne bottled just for his restaurants. The Ducasse Champagne, a medium-bodied, fairly rich wine, is made by the large Champagne house Lanson Champagne, because they are "very consistent," according to Chef Ducasse.

Despite his affection for Champagne, Chef Ducasse's cellar at home in Monaco is dominated by Burgundy and Bordeaux, many of them grand crus and first growths. But the chef said he wasn't a snob about high-status bottles; the wines simply had to be good. "It's not a question of price," he said. "It's good at five euros or it's good at 500 euros." What was the last five-euro wine that he had actually tasted? "It was an Italian wine. I had it in Maremma in Tuscany at my country hotel," he recalled. "It cost about 10 euros." (I assumed he was talking about its retail price, though of course it could have been from the hotel mini bar.)

But there was no time to inquire; the sommelier was already pouring the next wine, the 2009 Domaine Guillaman. A clean, bright white blend from Gascogne, it was a perfectly serviceable aperitif and accompaniment to the mixed plate of hors d'oeuvres that included cod brandade, veal tongue and leeks in vinaigrette sauce.

But our vinous paths diverged with the arrival of the next course: steamed loup de mer for me and steak frites for Chef Ducasse. "I was in the mood for steak at the last minute," he said when he saw me eyeing his lunch with ill-disguised envy.

Wine obsession: Pignan. Although it's technically the 'second' wine of the famed Chateauneuf du Pape producer Chateau Rayas, some believe it is one of the world's greatest expressions of old-vine Grenache.

Favorite (unlikely) food and wine pairing: A young Pomerol (red Bordeaux) with raspberries and dark chocolate.

Favorite wine shop: Les Caves Auge, Paris. It started selling wine in 1850, and proprietor Marc Sibard is a true character.

We were each served two different wines: two French reds for Chef Ducasse (the 2007 Domaine de L'Aurage Côtes de Castillon and the 2009 Gouleyant Malbec from Cahors) and a California Chardonnay (2008 Robin K from the Russian River) and a Chenin Blanc from the Loire (2009 Château de la Roulerie Anjou) for me.

The fish was good but I had to admit I wasn't enthralled by either of the white wines; the Robin K was a bit oaky, the Chenin a touch vegetal. Chef Ducasse offered me a taste of his wines. I liked his lush, ripe Cahors, though it wasn't an ideal match with my fish. Did he think that such things mattered, or was there too much fuss made about matching wine and food?

"There are no rules," he said. "You have to taste the wine with an open mind. You can drink red wine with lobster and white wine with lamb." In that case, perhaps he'd like to try my slightly vegetal Anjou or the rather oaky Chardonnay with his steak? "I'm not a fan of oaky wine." Chef Ducasse replied.

I liked his Cahors very much, on the other hand. "If the Cahors cost less than 10 euros, it was very good," Chef Ducasse replied. "When I taste a wine I like to know how much it costs." (The wine is in fact about \$13 at retail.)

"The world of wine is more creative than the world of cooking," Chef Ducasse observed, growing more expansive as he consumed a bit more of the Cahors. "There are so many impassioned winemakers. I think there are more impassioned winemakers than chefs."

Who were some of the impassioned winemakers he had in mind? "Madame Bize-Leroy," he answered decisively, naming the director of the great Bize-Leroy Burgundy domaine. "Madame Leroy was the

first to make biodynamic wines in Burgundy. She is an original." Who else? Chef Ducasse shook his head. "I don't want to give names. Someone will call and ask, 'Why didn't you mention me?'"

Ten minutes—and a glass of 2009 Château Villefranche Sauternes later—Chef Ducasse admitted to having a bit of an "obsession" with Pignan, the second wine of Château Rayas, the famed Châteauneuf du Pape estate. "It's everything I look for in a wine," he said, seeming to forget his self-imposed restriction on naming names.

"Food and drink is a pretense to seduction," Chef Ducasse said, waggling his eyebrows comically as we finished our first dessert—a strawberry frasier—and made our way through some profiteroles, sipping 2004 La Coume du Roy fortified wine from Maury, a French village near the Spanish border.

Suddenly the great multi-starred Michelin chef was transformed into... Maurice Chevalier. Wine—whether it costs 5 euros or 500—can do that do you.