

Franchise Times®

www.franchisetimes.com

The News and Information Source for Franchising

January 2004

Fine wine: So good it should be legal

By Nancy Weingartner

Jeff Kolton may be one of the newer partners with Kaufmann, Feiner, Yamin, Gildin & Robbins in New York City, and yet with certain critical decisions the other partners trust only him.

“Hey, Jeff,” Managing Partner Daniel Gildin whispers, motioning Kolton out of earshot of the firm’s clients at a recent dinner. “What do you suggest?”

Kolton studies the list for a long moment and then selects two perfect vintages—a white and a red—that are uncorked to rave reviews.

Most likely Kolton could have performed this duty a year ago, but now that he’s received his certification from the prestigious American Sommelier Association, his selections of wine carry some authority.

So why would a practicing attorney invest six months out of his life to take a weekly three-hour class that requires a minimum of 10-15 hours of studying a week to pass a weekly exam for a job he’ll probably never apply for?

“Anyone who knows me well knows that I’ve always loved wine,” Kolton wrote in an e-mail to friends who were wondering why he dropped off the face of the earth for the first six months of 2003. “Not obsessive-compulsive love like



Jeff Kolton is a bit of a Renaissance man. A jazz pianist since the age of 7 and now a certified sommelier, he’s always looking for ways to incorporate his love of wine, music and law into joint ventures.

the people who spend hours talking about the ‘terroir’ and arguing about the finest vintages of the last 20 years, but sort of a spiritual love. People who really enjoy wine, in my opinion, really enjoy life.”

And, anyone who knows Kolton knows he is someone who lives life large. Before rejoining Kaufmann’s firm, Kolton practiced law with some of the superstars of franchise law, founded and then sold FRANdata, an ahead-of-its-time company that packaged disclosure information for sale to franchise companies and traveled the world.

Kolton’s reward to himself

after being one of the few in his sommelier class to pass the grueling final exam was to hike the ancient ruins of Machu Picchu in Peru for eight days. It was not the more expected reward of sleeping in for five straight days and dusting one’s neglected pen collection and piano.

The sommelier course, by the way, rivaled law school and challenged his Ivy League education. For each wine-producing region in the world, Kolton and peers learned: the history of winemaking, the viticulture and viticulture of the area, the laws/regulations/labeling system, the appellations and sub-appellations,

the soil types, the climate moderators, the type of grapes grown there and the methodology. And if that wasn’t mind-boggling enough, try spelling French terms when you’ve never studied the language. Kolton resorted to mnemonic techniques, like memorizing STSHLMM in order to remember the names of the Medoc communes north to south. Or, as he told his friends in his e-mail: “I once knew a beautiful girl named Karen Severy, which is the only way I remembered that the top Muscadet Ser Lie was named Severt-Et-Maine” (we’re not sure if Karen has ever lived in Maine, but if she really wanted to help Kolton out, she’d move there).

Before becoming certifiably wine proficient, Kolton was already collecting wine. His 650-bottle collection is divided between his apartment in New York City, his parents’ home in New Jersey (his parents don’t really drink so they can be trusted) and storage. Here’s how he decides where each bottle resides: What he can drink in the next three years shares his apartment with him; those with a four- to 10-year timeline are stored at his parents’ and wines with 10 or more years to age are in storage.

“You have to know when things age,” Kolton says. “I don’t have a great nose, but

I can taste wine and tell how it's going to taste at maturity."

Most of us don't know what we're going to have for dinner on any given night of the week. Kolton knows what he's going to be drinking every month for the next year. Thanks to a customized computer program in Microsoft Access, Kolton has a schedule of when the wine in his collection will be ready to be tasted. And, he also personally knows the sommeliers at some of the best restaurants in New York City and all the locations where a person can taste fine wines seven nights a week.

Kolton's tastebuds, however,

aren't the only benefit to his law firm.

The business side of wine

Kolton may have a spiritual love of wine, but he also has an entrepreneurial spirit, which brings business into the law firm. In between tasting 10 to 15 wines per class and listening to lectures, Kolton saw the potential for combining business with pleasure, so to speak.

Wine—thanks to a preponderance of celebrity chefs and Americans' ongoing passion for trendy dining spots—has become the new "little black dress." In 2002, the global

wine market was about \$180 billion and the experts forecast that it will be \$216 billion by 2007, Kolton says.

Kolton already represents two vineyards in Italy and is in the process of developing a sommelier service with the president of the American Sommelier Association that can be franchised both domestically and internationally.

While the demand for a top-notch wine list has grown, most restaurants can't afford a certified sommelier on staff, Kolton contends.

The sommelier service will not only provide individualized wine lists to clients, but

incorporate efficiencies and creativity into the restaurant's wine sales that will add directly to the bottom line. On the other hand, sommeliers will be interested in becoming franchisees, Kolton says, because they can either do it around their "day job" as a restaurant's sommelier, or they can get rid of the crazy restaurant hours and work a normal schedule.

And, his non-vintage clients will benefit as well. "I had a client in London call me on my cell phone and say, 'We're about to close a deal. Here's what we're eating, what (wine) would you suggest?'" Kolton says. **[FT]**

The Wine List

If you think it's hard to get a short answer from an attorney on a legal matter, try asking a sommelier/attorney to list a few of his favorite whites and reds. Before Jeff Kolton would part with his list, he had to add the following caveat. "In order to answer you, I'd really need to qualify my answer as follows:

"Who am I eating with?

"Is it a business or pleasure meal?

"Am I at home or am I entertaining clients at a restaurant?

"What am I eating? For example—I love lobster. If I'm having it at home with some friends, I'm popping champagne...probably something creamy like a Gosset. However, if I'm at a restaurant, I'd more likely go with a Pouilly-Fouisse. If I was at a restaurant and trying to impress a client while having dinner, I'd probably get a great white burgundy. See where I'm going?" (I don't know about you, but he had me at lobster.)

So, here, gentle readers, is Kolton's list of favorites. If you want to know what you should be eating with each of the wines, which wines to reserve for clients and which to open at home, you're on your own. Just don't ask him during a billable hour.

Red

Proprietary Red: Palmeyer

Cabernet: Staglin; Stag's Leak

Cask 23

Barbera D'Alba: Vietti

Barolo: Gaya and Paulo Scavino

Late Harvest Zinfandel: Chateau Potelle's Zine

Pinot Noir: Littorai (preferably One Acre vineyard)

Whites

Champagne: Gosset

Italian Whites: Arneis (from Piedmont) or Fiano

American Chardonnay: Kistler, Martinelli

Moscato: La Spinetta

White Burgundy: Herbert Lamy Puligny Montrachet



Ordering wine in restaurants

Jeff Kolton's Do's:

1. Tell the sommelier what you're eating.
2. Point out wines you're already familiar with and like.
3. Let them know your price range (don't be embarrassed if it's in the low to medium range, sommeliers have seen it all).
4. Make sure the wine they recommend is commercially available. Nothing is worse than finding a wine you love and then not being able to buy a couple of bottles at the local liquor store to drink at home. (OK, maybe not being able to afford to buy a couple of bottles to drink at home would be worse.)

Prices vary from \$25 a bottle to more than \$100.