

A Fling with Riesling

CASSIA GM/WINE DIRECTOR **MARIANNA CALDWELL** ON DESIGNING A CREATIVE WINE LIST by Emily Johnston Collins



PHOTO: CAROL BAX

RIESLING IS THE WORKHORSE that powers general manager/wine director Marianna Caldwell's wine program at Cassia, the Rustic Canyon Family restaurant group's Southeast Asian-inspired brasserie in Santa Monica, California. Caldwell likes to pair Riesling with everything on the menu from Vietnamese prawns with Fresno chiles and garlic to steak frites with Phú Qu c Island peppercorn sauce, and her recommendations carry influence. While the variety featured on the wine list prior to her arrival, she says, guests were largely uninterested in it; now, about 30% of the bottles she opens are Riesling. But it's not only Caldwell's tableside enthusiasm for Riesling that converts guests into fans: It's also her creatively organized wine list.

Her idea for the format came early on in the pandemic, when she put together a cellar list to promote to-go wine sales. Once regular service recommenced, she converted it into a category on her regular list titled "What I'm Drinking Now" and put it on the front page. After it gained traction, she decided to move her entire Riesling selection onto the first page as well under the heading "What I'm Always Drinking." This was when she noticed an increased interest in her beloved wine.

That said, "the comment I get the most is 'I don't recognize any wines on this list,'" Caldwell acknowledges before pointing out that "[the wine list] is different because the food is also different," ranging from grilled pig's tail with fish sauce to dan dan noodles with minced duck. To help guests leave their comfort zone, she uses humor—for instance, the sparkling wine section is titled "Bubbles . . . For Celebrations or Just Because It's Tuesday"—as well as helpful category descriptions, as with "White . . . Crisp, Dry & Mineral-Driven" or "Red . . . Medium-Bodied, Lush & Earthy." What you won't find on her list are wines that are high in alcohol or tannin, which would clash with the spices in the food; she isn't afraid to steer fans of big red wines toward more comfortable options like beer or cocktails.

In 2022, Rustic Canyon Family opened another Southeast Asian restaurant: The Dutchess in Ojai, where I am wine director. The Dutchess serves Burmese cuisine for which my wine pairing of choice is Grüner Veltliner instead of Riesling, but I still look to Caldwell's wine list as an estimable reference, inspired by her concept, selections, and playful tone. **SJ**