West Shore Café creating a wine mecca



Wine service at West Shore Cafe in Homewood is under the direction of two sommeliers. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

HOMEWOOD – It's one thing for a restaurant to have an exceptional wine list, it's quite another to employ two sommeliers – especially in Lake Tahoe.

West Shore Café earned the 2016 Award of Excellence from Wine Spectator. This is given to restaurants that have at least 90 wines to choose from, as well as a thematic match to the menu in terms of price and style.

While other Tahoe restaurants earned this award, what distinguishes the Homewood eatery is that it is the only one in the basin to have two level two sommeliers. Most don't even

have one sommelier.



West Shore Café facts:

• It will reopen Nov. 23

• Every season there is a new menu

• In winter it is open for dinner Friday-Monday

• Lunch is served Saturday-Sunday

• It has been owned by JMA, the owners of Homewood Ski Resort, since 2010

• Seats 150

• Located in Homewood on the other side of Highway 89 from the ski resort.

The overly simplistic definition of a sommelier is someone who is an expert in wine and is able to assist diners with which wine to pair with their meal. There are four sommelier classifications, with Lisa Small and Rob Dubben at West Shore both at level two.

Together Small and Dubben create the wine list.

“When it comes to our list at West Shore Café, we look at a number of things. First, we look at what our competitors have

and how it is selling. Second, we think about the balance of the list, how to make it functional but also have the right choices so guests can be happy with their selection," Dubben told *Lake Tahoe News.* "Beyond that, we really try to look at classic styles from all regions of the world. I often ask myself questions like, what is interesting about this wine? What can I find that is off the beaten path that has great value and quality? What is something I know our clients will love?"

Looking at environmental practices is another component, as in organic farming. Last summer the menu was revamped to tell guests if a winery is certified organic, biodynamic or uses green practices.



Special chef-sommelier pairing:
Appetizer: King crab with a pepper crusted orange relish
Wine: Leeuwin Estate, Dry Riesling, Margaret River, Australia

Salad: Strawberry salad with a white balsamic dressing and arugula
Wine: Chateau Gassier, "Epritgassier", Rose, Provence,

France

Entrée: Red wine braised short ribs with salted roasted potatoes
Wine: Robert Craig “Affinity”, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley

Dessert: Mascarpone crusted cheese cake with chocolate dipped Madeline
Wine: Saracco, Moscato d’Asti, Piedmont, Italy.

To make the list more approachable it highlights flavor profiles. A Chardonnay might indicate if it has a big, buttery taste or is more oaky.

The menu also balances classic favorites with small case productions.

It’s not all about the sommeliers’ favorites, but what guests want and what will sell.

The sommeliers also work closely with Chef Ben Deinken so they have an understanding of what will be coming out of the kitchen. Based on a sampling of food and wines prepared for *Lake Tahoe News*, the trio is clearly in sync.

The guidance of a sommelier will often lead people to trying wines they have not heard of, but could be similar to what they are used to. The wine experts ask diners what they regularly drink, what they like in a wine – that’s more important than what they are ordering.

“I’m less of traditionalist in finding the right wine for the right food. It’s what they like,” Small told *Lake Tahoe News.*

Dubben said, “When guests ask for your opinion this can open up dialogue about which direction they want to go. Generally, I follow up in asking if they are feeling adventurous or if

they are interested in trying something that they cannot get everywhere. Reading the guest isn't always easy, but another way I sometimes go about it is to just bring up a wine that I love and tell the story about the wine, winemakers and the location of the winery. It paints a picture for the guest about what they are about to enjoy and it is my favorite way to talk about wine."



West Shore Cafe Sommeliers Lisa Small and Rob Dubben

Becoming a sommelier is no easy task. Tests are rigorous, involve blind tastings, written exams, knowing varietals, where in the world the wine came from and more complexities.

A few years ago at a different restaurant Small was called out by a diner for her lack of wine knowledge. That got her interested in learning, and now making a career out of her expertise.

Dubben took a bit more traditional route, starting in the restaurant business at age 14. Eventually he attended the International Culinary Center in Campbell where he spent three

months studying under five master sommeliers.

Dubben is studying to take the exam for the next level, called advanced. The top level is master sommelier.