



Hooked on classics

... but not so obsessed with them that there's no room for anything else. That's the philosophy behind the wine list at the fish restaurant Livebait, says *Paul Wootton*

With 28 white wines in a venue's list compared to 10 red, it seems odd to talk about the place having a balanced range, but then Livebait is a fish restaurant and bar.

While the notion that you can't drink red wine with fish is as outdated as Morris Minors and tea dances, white wines tend to have an affinity with the delicate flavours of many fish dishes and it's natural that whites should predominate in the range. As Jason Danciger, commercial director at Groupe Chez Gerard, which runs the chain of four Livebaits, says: "With a dish of baked sea bass, you would probably want a soft and aromatic white wine. But if it's cooked with Japanese noodles in a deep red wine sauce, you'd probably not want a white."

Danciger is at pains to stress the balance - although not necessarily between red and white.

"Balance is important, and we've got a good mix of New World and Old World," he says. "But we've also got a balance of new- and old-style wines. So our Muscadet is very traditional, matured on the lees in old oak barrels. But the Turtle Creek Chardonnay-Viognier is an example of very modern French winemaking, using stainless steel tanks."

"We've got the classics because of their popularity and because of people's lack of understanding of wines. We want to provide our customers with wines that they're familiar with, but we've also tried to put some unusual wines in there and

offer them some things that are different."

The list is changed every three months, which allows a larger number of unusual wines to be offered throughout the year, while keeping the core range of classics. "We have a lot of regular customers and we want to keep it interesting for them," says Danciger.

Despite the talk of balance and Danciger's assertion that Livebait probably sells as much New World as Old, France maintains a huge presence, with 25 wines from the total of 40.

Burgundy is represented with a good handful of wines, some of them gems, but isn't Danciger worried that sourcing value for money wines from

Burgundy is getting harder and harder?

"We buy a little bit in advance," he replies by way of explanation of Burgundy's large count on the list. "Long-term, there have to be other alternatives."

Highlights from the New World in the current list include New Zealand's flagbearer Cloudy Bay 1999, as well as Neudörf Riesling 1997 from the same country.

From the Old World, Danciger is particularly proud of the barrel-fermented white Rioja, which sells for £19 a bottle.

"It takes a bit of selling but once the staff have tasted it and get behind it, it does really well."

Training plays an important part of Livebait's operation, and consequently staff feel confident about encouraging customers to try new wines.

"We're getting passion from people who are on the shop floor," says Danciger. "And passion is what Livebait is all about."

BLIND TASTING

We asked wine writer Kitty Johnson to give her assessment of the list without the benefit of knowing which bar or restaurant it was from

"Modern-looking, minimalist list suggests an establishment of a similar style. No really pricey wines and quite a lot by the glass (some absurdly expensive) suggests a brasserie to me. Limited reds - could it be a vegetarian or a fish restaurant perhaps? The reds are more on the juicy, light side rather than any tannic blockbusters - it must be fish!"

Slightly predictable fizz list - could have a few more traditional method sparklers from the New or Old World. Quite a good mix of Old and New World whites, but where are the Germans or South Americans? Helpful to break it up into styles but some may be slightly misleading.

● Two more Livebaits are set to open in September or October, one in London, the other in Manchester. Another is planned for Birmingham next year. ➔