

Seattle *DINING!*

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Beáto Food & Wine: A deliberate savoring

By Connie Adams

As a concept, it's hard to beat. Wine and food are meant to be enjoyed together, slowly, in a relaxed environment. A wine bar should have a range of wines—style, price point, vintage, selection—and food to support the wine. From these basic tenets emerged Beáto.

Owner Brandon Gillespie may have always had a passion for food and wine, but he made his bread and butter acting as an international proprietary stock trader, trading equities between the U.S. and Europe. During travels in Europe for work, he collected wine. Like many people, after 9/11 he changed the course of his life. He attended the Institute of Culinary Education in New York and began working in the kitchen of Tocqueville. The chef encouraged him to get a taste of the front of the house as well.

Attending ICIF (Italian Culinary Institute for Foreigners) in Piedmont, Italy, was the next step. Brandon and his wife moved to Italy for nearly a year while he attended school and traveled in Southern Italy (Umbria, Campania, Sicily), working in kitchens, visiting wineries and meeting winemakers. As his experience grew, Brandon realized that he enjoyed the wine aspect more than being in the kitchen.

Contacting the Italian Wine Merchants in New York (founded by Sergio Esposito, chef Mario Batali, and restaurateur Joe Bastianich), he interviewed with Sergio while in Perugia, Italy. "They're the best source for Italian wines," explains Brandon. "They have a high-end boutique retail shop with a private event space in the back where they can seat 20-120 people, offering 5-7 courses with 10-12 wines. It's a very cool place to learn, with chefs like Emeril Lagasse and Mario being there for special events." They also have the largest Italian vintage collection in the world. Brandon was the general manager there for one and a half years.

Returning to Seattle (he and his wife both lived here prior to attending college), he immediately started looking for space to open Beáto. He bid on several locations, but nothing worked out, so he began to apply for jobs. Just in time, he heard that Shing and Ellie Chin were closing O2 and he acted quickly, securing the spot.

Brandon's original plan was to have a high-end but more typical wine bar with simple food. He realized that his vast collection of Italian wine, especially the Barolos, needed more. His original chef, Nick Devine, had a concept for food that meshed perfectly with Brandon's theory: food, especially Italian, is based on simple, quality ingredients. "After a two or two-and-a-half hour meal and a bottle of wine, you shouldn't be uncomfortably full, you should almost feel refreshed. Our food reflects this in that we suggest several courses, not too much of one thing, no heavy sauces and small amounts of butter. Nick saw this and worked with the wine in mind." Recently Nick has returned to New Jersey and two chefs now share the kitchen: Matt Williams and Devon Aliano. Thirty-to-sixty percent of the menu

changes each month. "As much as humanly possible, we use organic, local foods," says Brandon.

Beáto offers some Northwest wines, but predominately Italians. "Italian wine can be intimidating, with unfamiliar grapes and labels in Italian," says Brandon. "We provide a vehicle to explore and learn about Italian wine. Each month we have a wine flight that allows people to try four different wines (2.5 ounces each) and see the differences. For example, in January 2008 we did southern reds."

With over 150 names on their wine list, there is plenty to learn. At any point in time, there are about a dozen wines by the glass. "For special occasions, we offer more by the glass. On our December 19 one-year anniversary, we opened Barolo wines back to 1989," explains Brandon. For everyday drinks, wines are ordered through distributors. Most of Brandon's collection is offered on the reserve list. "You often can't find really good Italian wine in Seattle. It has a lot to do with the fact that there's lead time involved; local distributors have to get the wine from other areas of the country. But it provides me with an opportunity to offer something different." Beáto also has a retail sales license and Brandon often finds himself the only buyer of certain wines in the area—a bonus for people looking for specific Italian wines.

"We want people to know that Beáto is about preserving the dining experience," explains Brandon. "The experience should offer a clean, not heavy meal, good service, great wine and a sommelier who knows wine. It should not be rushed. We plan for two hours plus for each table. We're equally happy with people who simply want to come in, sit at the counter and have a glass of wine and an antipasti plate. We'd be ecstatic if more late nighters came in on the way home for a glass of wine."

One of the surprises he's had over this first year is how random the Seattle diner is. One night everyone will make reservations, the next night it's almost all walk-ins. "It's difficult to estimate how many people will show up any given night," says Brandon. "But that's one reason it's great to use purveyors who are close by!"

As Beáto enters its second year, more wine dinners are planned and Brandon is looking at adding wine tastings (sit-down experiences with light food for \$25-40 depending on the wine) on either Saturday or Sunday afternoons. They'll continue to offer special tasting menus, four-to-five courses, for events like Valentine's Day and New Year's Eve. And, always, they'll offer a relaxed dining experience where savoring every sip of wine and every morsel of food is the right thing to do.

Beáto Food & Wine
3247 California Ave SW
Seattle, WA 98116
206-923-1333
www.beatoseattle.com