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IMAGES COURTESY THE CLIFFS

## TURNING SERVERS INTO SOMMELIERS

IN MAY, THE CLIFFS DOUBLED THE NUMBER OF WINE EXPERTS ON STAFF WHO ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP MEMBERS ACROSS SEVEN CLUBS NAVIGATE WINE LISTS.

**ACCORDING TO ERIC COOPERMAN**, a Certified Sommelier, Certified Wine Specialist and the Director of Beverage for The Cliffs, a collection of seven private clubs in the western Carolinas, the most stressful point in a meal is when the server drops the wine list into the hands of the host.

"Wine lists scare people," says Cooperman, who has been with The Cliffs since 2010 and collaborates with the chefs and culinary teams from each of the seven communities to expertly pair wines with seasonal menus. "Most everyone loves a good glass, but choosing from a list can be overwhelming and intimidating."

To help members navigate the labyrinth of choices, The Cliffs counts twelve wine experts among its food-and-beverage staff. Nearly all of these sommeliers—including Francis Turck, Executive Chef of The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyard (Sunset, S.C.)—were inspired to take the exam after participating in the club's wine-centric professional development program.

"The training is no joke," says Cooperman.

It lasts for five months—from November through March—and consists of weekly, three-hour classes that cover wine, wine regions, grapes, vintages, producers, service standards and more.

"As our staff becomes more educated, they become more comfortable with

helping members to choose the best wines," says Cooperman. "These individuals bring our lists to life."

### ON THE LIST

Crafting wine lists across seven properties for more than 6,000 members has its own set of challenges. Some of The Cliffs' clubs have a book that's twenty pages long. Others have a curated list that features 20 wines total.

The Cliffs at Walnut Cove in Asheville, N.C. has an extensive wine list that recently earned the Award of Merit from the Club Managers Association of America's International Wine Society 2015 Wine Program Awards.

"We engage the staff at each club when we choose what goes on its list," says Cooperman. He meets annually with the seven general managers from each of The Cliffs' clubs to taste through more than 100 wines and create a master-by-the-glass list, which is featured at all seven properties alongside four selections that are unique to each.

"Even with 12 sommeliers, we might not be there all the time for every member," Cooperman says. "So when we build lists, we have to include 'parachutes,' to give those members who might find themselves in that situation a level of comfort and familiarity."

Ultimately, the wines that are most successful among The Cliffs' properties have a strong sense of place.



## A Wine Club within The Cliffs' Clubs

Earlier this year, The Cliffs Wine Consortium, led by Eric Cooperman, a Certified Sommelier, Certified Wine Specialist and the Director of Beverage for The Cliffs, a collection of seven private clubs in the western Carolinas, began a new monthly wine club offered exclusively to the more than 6,000 Cliffs members. Dubbed uncorked!, the subscription-based program encourages members to enjoy different wines, including an array of varietals and regions.

Joining is simple and easy for interested members. Selections are available for pickup at the member's designated club on the second Friday of the month. Subscriptions and purchases are billed to the member's account, and gift subscriptions are also available.

Members start their subscription by choosing their preferred assortment of monthly wines from the following choices:

- Two bottles of red wine per month
- Two bottles of white wine per month
- One bottle of red wine and one bottle of white wine per month

Along with two bottles of wine, participating members receive an informative tasting guide loaded with pertinent information about the grape varietal, winemaker, history, region and style of wine, as well as a featured food-pairing recipe written by The Cliffs' culinary team.

"There's a lot of synergy between the chefs and the wine program," says Cooperman. "As the beverage program continues to improve and evolve with programs like uncorked!, the quality of our food continues to improve. We're pushing each other to constantly improve and evolve."



*Eric Cooperman (left) pursued and achieved his own certification before his success began to motivate others around him to the same. (Pictured with Master Sommelier John Blazon.)*

"They taste of the region they're from," says Cooperman. "They aren't necessarily the hippest or trendiest wines. But they have strong *terroir*."

### STOCK YOUR CELLAR

The buying power of The Cliffs allows for substantial cost savings, especially on the retail side, which is passed along to the membership.

"Each week, we offer a 'Stock Your Cellar' deal on one type of wine," says Cooperman. "We send an e-mail about the wine to our 6,000 members, who have five days to get in on the deal before the door shuts."

Typically, The Cliffs is able to sell the wine at 40% off retail.

"From a marketing standpoint, it makes a ton of sense for the winery," says Cooperman. "Plus, members are thrilled to be able to buy quality wines at an exclusive discount."

Before Cooperman, The Cliffs sold between five and ten cases each week as part of the communities' retail program. Now, upward of 100 cases are sold each week.

"There's next-to-no overhead on this program," says Cooperman. "And revenues are up more than ten times what we had three years ago." 🍷