

{ somm vs. somm }

The Judgement of Irvine

**FRANCE OR ITALY? TWO MASTER SOMMS HELP
DECIDE WHICH COUNTRY REIGNS SUPREME**

by Rich Manning

PHOTOS: OG EVENT PHOTOS/BRIAN FEINZIMER



Master Sommeliers Fred Dame and Peter Neptune: frenemies for a day.

WHEN A WINE-PAIRING dinner comes with the moniker “Battle of the Masters: Sommelier vs. Sommelier,” you can expect the evening will be filled with either pretentious sips and swirls or fun and slightly irrelevant imbibing. As I arrived for the event at TAPS Fish House & Brewery in Irvine, California, in late March, I was prepared for the former but hoping for the latter.

The duo engaging in the evening’s viticultural warfare were Master Sommeliers and legendary enophiles Fred Dame and Peter Neptune, so the event’s name wasn’t merely clever hyperbole. Dame sent five carefully chosen French wines into the breach against Neptune’s quintet of hand-picked Italian labels, and it was up to the crowd of more than 100 attendees to decide which country—and whose selections—reigned supreme.





The TAPS Team: General Manager Masaya Yamazaki and Executive Chef Ryan Robertson.

The collective gravitas of it all seemed poised to demand highbrow affects, but then it happened. Right before dinner commenced, I looked at the opposite end of my table and spotted a woman taking a giant gulp of Nicolas Feuillatte Brut from a red wine glass. The champagne flute in front of her sat empty, clean, and forlorn. So much for pretense—thank Bacchus.

The evening's presenters captured the spirit of my table partner's copious swig throughout the event. Dame repeatedly chided Neptune for cheating, his tongue firmly wedged in his cheek, before Neptune dropped into a *Beavis and Butthead* impression as he talked about sealing a wine's bung. Between these snippets of breezy candor, they broke down each wine in an informative yet unpretentious manner, making the selections themselves even more approachable.

This snooty-free zone is precisely the atmosphere TAPS has aimed to create through its wine dinners, which occur in its private event space every other month. "We want to show our guests that wine dinners are exciting, fun, and educational," General Manager Masaya Yamazaki says. "The response from our guests so far have been amazing. They've been spreading the word that we are the go-to place for wine dinners."

Bringing in luminaries like Dame and Neptune to talk wine—in such an accessible manner, no less—is just one of the ways the restaurant earns this reputation. Like all of the wines featured in TAPS' semi-regular wine-pairing affairs, the bottlings the Master Sommeliers highlighted were procured in conjunction with Pavilions, an upscale grocery chain that delivered an artisanal market experience to Southern California residents long before Whole Foods dominated the public consciousness.

The partnership produces consistent excellence in TAPS' wine selections, as well as a few other bonuses. To wit: Phil Markert, Pavilions' Vice President of Merchandising and Marketing, initially

hatched the idea of making Dame and Neptune's Master Somm showdown an international incident.

The wine dinners also afford Executive Chef Ryan Robertson and his crew the opportunity to stray from the restaurant's typical surf-and-turf milieu, which results in epicurean voodoo like the truffle and foie gras *trangoli* and the mind-bending *niçoise* salad served to us at the dinner. It's a diversion Robertson relishes. "We have so many talented culinarians here with diverse backgrounds and experiences that it's easy to be creative," he says. "Although these

dinners take an enormous amount of time, effort, planning, and teamwork, it's also a chance for us to show what we are capable of and do some really cool dishes."

The evening ultimately ended in a draw: Dame's French wines scored in the first two courses, with Neptune's Italians emerging victorious in courses three and five. The cause of the deadlock was Robertson's lamb neck, potato, and chive *gnocchi*; half the



room felt it worked best with the *Château Pesquié* 2013 *Quintessence* Dame picked out, while the other half preferred Neptune's idea of pairing the dish with the 2012 *Camigliano Brunello di Montalcino*. (I was part of this latter half. Sorry, Fred).

Of course, there's only one thing to do in the event of a proper stalemate—hold a re-match. According to Yamazaki, it's already green-lit. "We're working on another five-course, ten-wine pairing dinner with Fred and Peter," he says. "If legends of that magnitude are talking about doing another wine dinner with us, then I think we're doing something right." ❧