



The poet W. B. Yeats once wrote, “in dreams begin responsibilities.” And that’s how it seems to have worked out for Justin Kuruvilla, wine director at Elements restaurant in Princeton. “You could say that I essentially have my dream job: I get to taste exceptional food and wine for a living,” Mr. Kuruvilla says.

For the wine director of an establishment honored in the 2010 “Opinionated Dining Guide” as one of the 30 most important U.S. restaurants, “tasting” means much more than simply enjoying elite kindai tuna salad with a dram of Aloxe-Corton; it means making savvy choices.

Case in point: the newly expanded wine list. “We have recently added over 150 selections to our by-the-bottle list and currently offer 20 wines by the glass,” Mr. Kuruvilla explains. “We’ve significantly increased the breadth of our selections in Bordeaux, Burgundy, Rioja, Ribera del Duero, Piedmont and Tuscany.” There’s a painstaking selection process implicit in adding that many wines; for every wine chosen there might be six or seven others rejected.

Mr. Kuruvilla doesn’t make these selections in a vacuum, he chooses wines with Chef Scott Anderson’s innovative culinary creations in mind. As he says, “the food is very seasonal here, so the wine list needs to be versatile and just as dynamic in order to accommodate Scott’s cuisine.”

In keeping with the restaurant’s ethos, wine is one of the basic elements of the dining experience, part of an alchemical collaboration between Mr. Kuruvilla, Chef Anderson and the staff.

“It really is a team effort,” Mr. Kuruvilla says. “We think it’s important to have the kitchen staff taste the food and wine pairings together, so we all get better. Sometimes, we’ll bring a wine to the kitchen and ask them to create a dish that showcases it — that’s when magic really happens.”

If Mr. Kuruvilla is living his dream as Elements’ wine director, it’s not because of magic. As the Montgomery Township native explains, he started working in the food service industry at an early age.

“The restaurant bug bit me when I was 16. I worked in a little pizza place doing a little bit of everything: washing dishes, making pizza, prep work and delivering food. My first real taste of restaurant culture, however, was with the Terra Momo group here in Princeton. After that I worked with restaurant Nicholas in Red Bank and the Michael Mina group in Atlantic City before taking a position with Elements.”

Like many oenophiles, Mr. Kuruvilla can trace his passion for wine to a precise moment, a kind of liquid epiphany. “I remember tasting a wine from Sicily where they use the grape Nerello Mascalese. The wine sang to me. It hit every sweet spot on my palate. It was juicy, vibrant and fresh, unlike a lot of wines grown in hot climates.”

As wine director, Mr. Kuruvilla fields selections by the glass and bottle to complement Chef Anderson’s ever-evolving menus; as sommelier, he fields questions and makes recommendations, sometimes using a curious technique to help diners with their choices. “I like to personify wine,” he explains, “it makes it easier for me to understand, and I find that it makes it easier for those unfamiliar with a varietal or region. For example, I’ll often relate a wine to a

Elements Wine Director Justin Kuruvilla

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character from a famous movie.”

Mr. Kuruvilla continues to cultivate his knowledge, as he’s done throughout his career. “In April I’ll be traveling to Verona for Vinitaly, the world’s biggest Italian wine event,” he says. “I’ll be able to meet the winemakers and travel to vineyards to better understand what makes a great Italian wine.”

Aspiring to his profession’s ultimate accolade, Mr. Kuruvilla has begun the journey toward attaining the title of Master Sommelier. (Since the program began in 1973, only 174 people worldwide have earned the coveted degree.)

Along with professional development and study, Mr. Kuruvilla’s duties as wine director of a nationally recognized restaurant challenge him daily —responsibilities he views as a dream come true.