



# The Best Job in the World

## by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Bear Dalton at  
Ch. Margaux



All the Spec's crew at  
VinExpo 2009.



Tasting (and spitting)  
at a morning tasting of  
over 40 mostly high  
acid Macon wines.

One night while cooking dinner, I overheard my son tell his buddy "My dad's the fine wine buyer for Spec's Liquor Stores." His friend was already aware that Spec's is the largest retail purveyor of wine and spirits in Texas (apparently, his dad shops at Spec's).

He said "Wow. Your dad must have the best job in the world." I had to agree.

On Sunday February 8, 2009, Ken Hoffman ran the following note in his Houston Chronicle column:

*I believe the award for Best Job, Houston-based, would have to go to Bear Dalton of Spec's fame. Let's see: travel first-class to foreign cities to taste wine — and then buy it and drink more. Rinse and repeat.*  
- Michael Crippen, Houston.

I guess that made it official – even if it is a bit of an oversimplification. Certainly not all of my travel is first class (I seem to remember several long flights in the middle seat on the last row of coach including one full Air France flight with seven youth soccer teams on board). And while I do get to visit many of the fancy places, I have also been to my share of tank farms and industrial parks where wine is made. Nevertheless, I take his point.

Being the fine wine buyer for Spec's can be a lot of work and the hours are long but it is never boring and I am constantly learning from suppliers, coworkers, and customers. And I'm constantly tasting new wines to select what will fill out Spec's offering of well over 10,000 different wines. By the way, we believe that the selection of wines Spec's stocks on Smith Street is the largest selection of wines actually available at a retailer anywhere in the world.

Having worked with wine since 1977, I went to work for Spec's in July of 1996. In addition to my duties at Spec's, I also teach wine classes at the Rice University School of Glasscock Continuing Studies, sometimes at the University of Houston's Conrad Hilton School of Hotel and Restaurant Management, and at the Wine School at l'Alliance Française. I love what I do. Sometimes it seems like I never really leave the office because people will approach me before church on Sunday to ask what to serve at their daughter's wedding reception or will ride up next to me on a trail ride to ask whether they should decant a 1999 Leoville Barton. For many customers, for many of Spec's employees, and for most of my friends, I'm the "answer grape." So I'm never really "off duty" ... but that's OK; neither are the owners of Spec's (who also remember some bad flights and worse wines).

As a "fine wine buyer", some people think that I spend all my time tasting and talking with suppliers, often over long lunches at Tony's, Brennan's or RDG. That is, of course, when I'm not traveling to France, Spain, California, Argentina or some other exotic locale to taste wines at the properties where they are made. I'm sure that if you went by all the suppliers' expense reports, it looks that way – at least with regard to the long lunches at fancy restaurants.

So what do I really do? I won't go into all the fairly mundane sounding but necessary computer work - pricing and programming – that I do. Or belabor the three or more hours a day I spend dealing with email from both customers and suppliers, not to mention fellow Spec's employees. At some times of the year, I am up at 5:30am checking email from Europe so I can answer and still get a reply back before the companies in Europe close for the day. The Bordeaux futures campaign which is just now starting up is one such time. Instead, let's focus on the fun stuff: lunch, tasting, and travel.

As to lunch, the boring truth is I eat lunch at my desk while working on the computer three or four days a week. Only rarely do I go to lunch with a supplier. If I leave the office, it is usually to run an errand or to walk across the street to Charivari for a bowl of soup and one of their excellent lunch specials. Eating at my desk is not all bad: Spec's has a great deli with super sandwiches and varied list of soups and lunch specials.

As to the tasting part, my job does require that I taste a lot of wine. Most of that tasting is done in my office at Spec's which my bosses John and Lindy Rydman (the owners of Spec's) were thoughtful enough to equip with a sink to dump wine glasses and spittoons into and both a wine cooler (55°) and small refrigerator (42°) so I can keep both red and white wines at the correct temperatures to taste.

All that tasting – anywhere from 20 to more than 100 wines per day (it works out to something over 9,000 wines a year) – can take its toll. It is hard on the teeth and tongue not to mention the liver and the waistline. Tasting can seem somehow romantic but even tasting in chateaux in Bordeaux and at domaines in Burgundy can wear on you when you are going from 8am to midnight and visiting twelve to fourteen places per day for several days in a row. And I can assure you that there is nothing romantic about lining up ten eastern European Cabernets on my desk to try to find one potential \$2.99 wine that doesn't smell like bug spray.

After evaluating all the wines I taste from a sensory standpoint (and then spitting them out), it is also my job to evaluate them from a price standpoint. Are they priced competitively with their real "comparables" in the market? Will they make it on to Spec's shelves at prices that make sense to our customers? And who is the ultimate customer that will buy this particular wine from Spec's after we buy it from our supplier? I really need to know who that end customer is before I buy a wine. It is also my job to tell Spec's customers via articles and notes in our Spec's Update email newsletter about the myriad wines Spec's carries. I need to know who I am writing to.

As to business travel, I'm on the road about seven weeks a year visiting wine producing areas. Over the last three years, I've spent eight weeks in France, a week in Germany, and four-plus weeks in California plus a little time in Boston, Florida, and Washington for other tastings. While all of these are business trips, they are business trips to pretty cool places that beat visiting Cleveland in January all to heck and gone.

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I am not the only one buying wine at Spec's. Joseph Kemble is responsible for our Italian selection. Bill Coates handles South Africa. Collin Williams works with our Spanish selections and backs up Kerry Furman in handling our wine logistics. Even though I buy most of the rest of the wines, I rely heavily on Kia Gaines (our Champagne diva), Ross Tefteller (South American wines), Zach Pearson (German and Austrian), Ralph Castellano (Burgundy), and Alex Lobodin (Bordeaux) And my bosses John Rydman and Hermen Key still keep their hand in. Joe gets to Italy every year and Bill travels regularly to South Africa and South America. John Rydman and I went to VinExpo in Bordeaux in June 2007 and a bunch of us went back in 2009 – which was John Rydman's eighth VinExpo - including the first VinExpo ever held.

The wine we buy as a result of our tastings here, there, and everywhere is a lot of what differentiates Spec's diverse range of products from what is carried by other large wine and spirits retailers. It's been that way for a long time now. Back in 1994 when John Rydman was the wine buyer for Spec's (before his father-in-law Mr. Spec Jackson passed away) and I was a wholesaler calling on Spec's, he asked me to bring in some Cassis (the white wine from Provence, not the black currant crème from Burgundy). As I was kneeling down working the new wine onto the shelf, a customer came in and asked a member of Spec's wine department if Spec's carried Cassis and explained that he wanted the wine, not the liqueur. I just stood up and handed him the bottle I had just put a price sticker on. Other than the size of Spec's selection and the number of stores, not much has changed. We're still looking to buy the best wines we can for the lowest prices and sell them to our customers at the lowest possible prices.

Do I have the best job in the world? I can't think of another I'd rather have. I love what I do and am never (well, very rarely anyway) bored. For me, this is the best job in the world. ❀