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nosh
Pronunciation: ˈnɑʃ
Yiddish, To snack or eat on the sly

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NEW FORCE IN THE MAINE SPIRIT WORLD:
Hannaford exec Ralph Hersom and wife Kim Hersom, a private chef, in their Hingham, Massachusetts, wine shop.

HUNGRY EYE

It’s Wine O’Clock Somewhere Here!

Meet the new sommelier in town. By Claire Z. Cramer

When Ralph Hersom was named Wine Director of Le Cirque 2000 in 1997 at age 26, Amanda Hesser wrote in the New York Times that although he didn’t “look or act the part—he doesn’t wear a tastevin around his neck or a scowl on his face—he is in charge of one of the largest and most prestigious wine lists in the world.” He was the exception among many of New York’s sommeliers who suddenly seemed to be young hotshots. “Their spontaneity in making us discover new things is more interesting than their knowledge,” chef Daniel Boulud told Hesser.

But Hersom had come to Le Cirque after a hitch as Cellarmaster at Windows On The World at New York’s World Trade Center, where he trained under wine maven and educator Kevin Zraly, so he was bringing youthful enthusiasm and the chops.

By 2005, Hersom was finished with the fabulous New York restaurant scene. For the next 11 years, Ralph and his wife Kim Hersom ran Ralph’s Wine & Spirits in Hingham, Massachusetts, which has just been sold. It was there they developed their in-store Corks & Forks wine and food pairing classes, which they’ll take to new venues.

Hersom likes to keep busy. He’s just taken the newly created position of Category Manager of Beer, Wine, and Spirits for the Hannaford supermarket chain throughout the Northeast. From his office at corporate headquarters, he plans to refresh those familiar aisles.

How did you get your start in restaurants and wine?
I first got involved in restaurants working at Legal Sea Foods in Worcester, Massachusetts, back in the early ’90s. I’m from South Grafton, and I’d been studying electrical engineering. Legal has a great training program for their wait staff, part of which is a wine course. After that, there was no turning back. I was bitten by the wine bug! I sold my possessions and bought a one-way ticket to San Francisco with the hopes and dream of becoming a sommelier.

Where did you do your journeyman work before Windows on the World and Le Cirque?
My first sommelier job was at Moose’s Restaurant in San Francisco circa 1994-1996, after which I headed back east for the reopening of Windows on the World, which had been closed since the first terrorist bombing in 1993, working under the great wine guru Kevin Zraly.

In her memoir Garlic and Sapphires, former New York Times restaurant critic Ruth Reichl describes the night she visited Windows on the World to review it. She raves about you as “affable and enthusiastic, the kind of person who could make a wine lover out of anyone.” Was she nice—or was she demanding? Was she in one of her disguises?
She was extremely nice! I had no idea who she was, as I was fresh off the plane from San Francisco, and even the maitre d’ failed to...
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recognize her, even though she was not in a disguise! Needless to say, one of the managers noticed her on her way out after having finished dinner. I didn’t sleep for weeks until that review came out.

A humorous piece in the British magazine Punch decries the current frat-boy competitive style of the American sommelier, or “somm,” with “next-gen swagger [and] tattoos on display.” Your thoughts?
Sommeliers these days are definitely different than the buttoned-up suit-and-tie type of yesteryear, due in large part to the more relaxed dining atmosphere that we now have. As long as they’re making wine accessible to the masses in a user friendly, non-intimidating kind of way, I have no problem.

“The masses” doesn’t exactly describe diners at Windows on the World or Le Cirque.
Robert de Niro was a regular at Le Cirque 2000. He was very low key, would dine early, around 6 p.m., and we’d always put him at table 39 in the corner, out of the public’s view. He really loves wine. We chatted often about the possibility of planting grapes at his weekend home in New Paltz. He held his birthday party at the restaurant, and what a party! Robin Williams, Bruce Springsteen, Tom Hanks, to name a few of the guests. It was held on a Sunday night, and the restaurant was closed. Sirio Maccioni [Le Cirque’s owner] had been on vacation in Italy and flew in especially that day for the celebration.

Hannaford shoppers have benefited from the updated and more sophisticated food selections available there in recent years. Is your job to do the same for beverages?
Exactly. I’ve been hired by Hannaford to help improve upon the selection of wine, beer, and spirits they currently carry. I’m fortunate that past decisions have established a great foundation for me to build upon. I’ll use my fine-wine, craft beer, and specialty spirits background to bring some excitement to the center-store aisles, helping to elevate it to the next level.

Had you spent time in Portland before moving here?
My wife and I visited Portland seven times in the last year and a half—it’s definitely one of the best foodie cities in the USA. We’re amazed at the new spots opening up and just how many great places there are to choose from that seem to have it all dialed in.

On our first visit, we met some friends for a delicious brunch at Petite Jacqueline, which is ironic since the chef was Fred Eliot—a Le Cirque alumni—and we’re now living in Longfellow Square.
One of the “top 10 try before you die foods” has to be Eventide’s Brown Butter Lobster Roll. The kids love Duckfat’s Tahitian Vanilla Bean shake with a side of fries as well as pizza at Flatbread Company, and of course there’s the Omakase at Miyake, a Japanese restaurant that can at times rival New York City’s.
Piccolo for brunch is a truly wonderful experience. And one of the most comfortable bars to dine at and try some fun wines is Fore Street. The bartender/sommelier Adam Beckwith is fantastic. We’ve had fabulous cocktails at Portland Hunt + Alpine Club, can’t wait to settle in and visit chef Matt Ginn and his team at EVO. Chef David Levi of Vinland has to be cooking some of the most creative and flavorful dish-
es in all of Portland. Our most recent dinner there was outstanding. Then there's the monthly Sunday dim sum at Honey Paw—the Fry Bread with Uni Butter and the Lobster Wontons are ridiculous!

I'm looking forward to developing a tasting group in Portland as well as monthly BYOB wine-themed dinners at a restaurant(s) to be determined. It's a great way to learn about wine by sharing great bottles I've collected in my cellar, which currently holds about 1,000 bottles. If people are interested, we'll do Corks & Forks events in Maine.

What's your perfect wine for a lobster roll? For the classic Maine lobster roll, I love to drink a white wine made from the Viognier grape. On the import side, either Yves Cuilleron or Pierre Gaillard's Condrieu from France—which was one of Robert DeNiro's favorites, coincidentally—or Illahe Vineyards Viognier from Oregon.

What inspired you to get out of restaurants and into retail stores? Are restaurants increasingly no place for the affable and enthusiastic?

I'd worked for Le Cirque 2000 the entire seven years it was located at the New York Palace Hotel, and the last dinner there was December 31, 2004. (HBO has a great documentary titled Le Cirque–A Table in Heaven.) I woke up on New Year’s Day 2005 and decided it was best to go out on a high note, leave the restaurant biz, and take my talents to the retail side of things.

Were you burned out on rich wine snobs? I must say, during my seven years at Le Cirque I found the clientele to be very knowledgeable about wine and encountered very little to no wine snobbery despite dealing with the top one percent of the one percent. Certainly it was very stressful operating at that level for seven years, but I'm organized and I'd watch the reservation book before service and organize the wines and stemware for the various VIPs. Very rarely did they look at the wine list, as I knew what their favorites were and prepared them in advance.

So your real skill is guiding people to discover what they really like.

I figured these individuals have to make hundreds of decisions daily, so I would make one for them! I'm still in contact with my former colleagues at Le Cirque as well as some of the clientele.

And with my other passion—music—I still consult on the wine side of things for various musicians and bands for their private collections. Le Cirque was just down the street from Sony BMG, so all the music executives would come in and bring their artists in. Mike D. (loves white Burgundy) of the Beastie Boys would celebrate his birthday with us. Rush is one of my all-time favorites; I showed up at their final show in Boston last year with some Grand Cru Burgundy for Geddy and Alex, who were happy to reciprocate with backstage passes. Wine has opened so many doors for me...

Right now, what I’m listening to is jazz heavy, with Bill Evans always in rotation, as well as Miles Davis and Chet Baker. But also Everything But The Girl, Bon Iver, and Ray Lamontagne. My taste in music is as diverse as my taste in wine. It’s all mood dependent!