

Wine School

Group sommelier Christopher Cooper
introduces his new initiative – Wine School,
aimed at giving every member of front-of-house
staff a solid knowledge of wine

Photograph: Dai Williams



It's fair enough to say that the world is at our fingertips today, with iPads, apps, Google and the like, but there's no written substitute for knowing what wines taste like and why they taste like they do. Not everybody can have the breadth of knowledge that a sommelier has, but all sommeliers like me started somewhere and even now I'll still use that world of written information when necessary. So we combined some of that information with my collection of thoughts on wine and created Wine School to empower Soho House Group staff and re-energise their passion for wine: while we're refreshing the wine lists, why not also refresh our minds and our knowledge?

Wine School isn't about making mini sommeliers out of everyone – we're not actually teaching anything most people don't already know – but rather is about reiterating the knowledge that we already have, giving us all confidence in our assumptions and realising that actually we know more than we thought. We're not only driving House staff forward in their knowledge of wines in general but also in the flavours of the wines on the lists themselves. 'Is this a light or a heavy wine?' 'What is that smell? Is it mango or is it lychee?' If we've actually tasted it and can tell guests what it tastes like, and if we even like the wine ourselves, then we're all going to be a winner. I tell so many of the staff members that they should 'be confident, because you're right in what you think'.

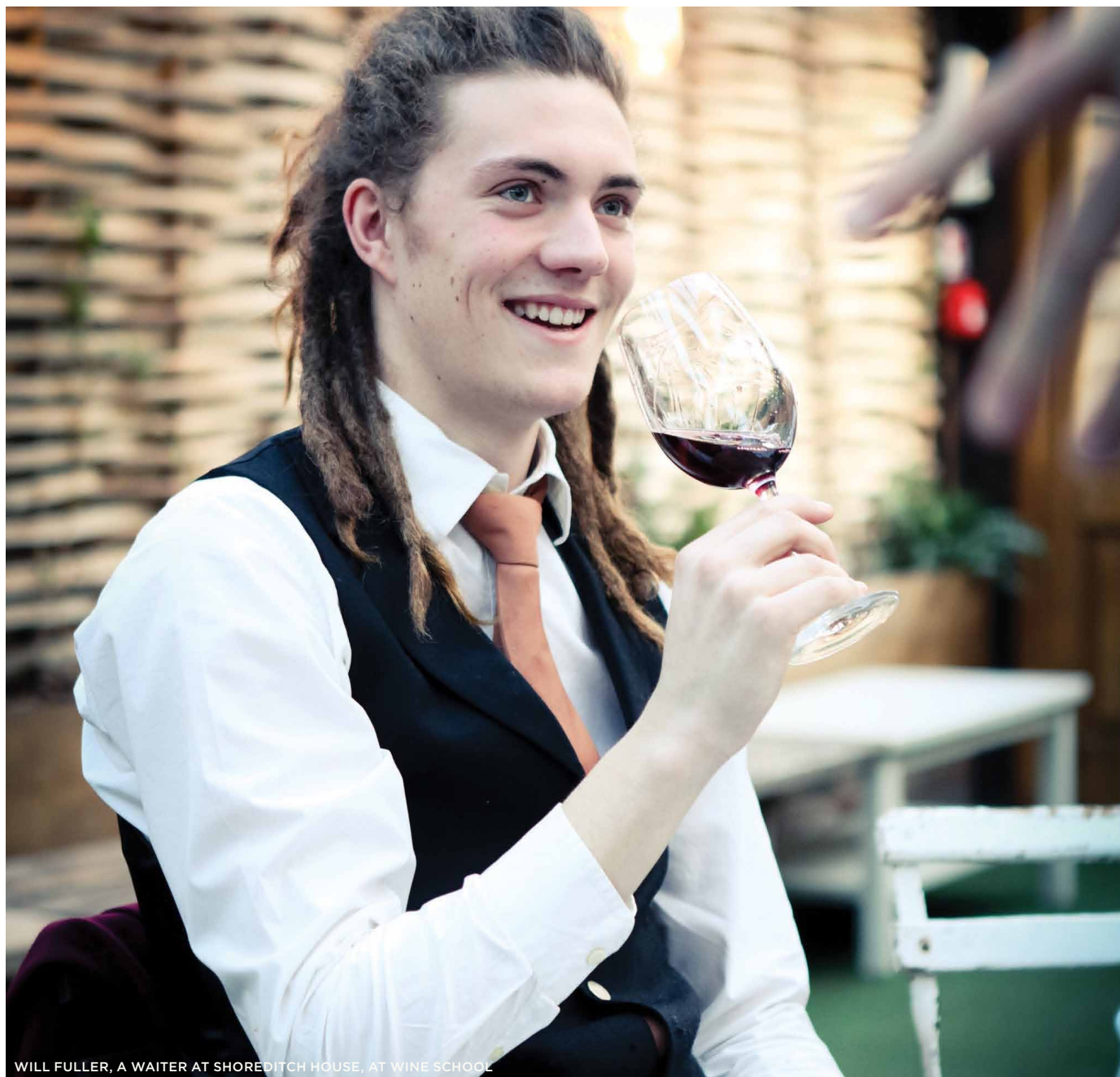
It's a difficult thing as we all have different levels of knowledge and we all learn at different rates, but we only go as fast as the slowest person because it has to be inclusive. And to cover all the front-of-house at the Soho House Group is a tall order, but not beyond us. It's an exciting time to be working for the Soho House Group and also an exciting time to be our guest, as we'd all love to know more about wine. With Wine School in place and Wine Academy on the way, we're building on everyone's wine knowledge whether they be bartenders, waiters, managers or hosts.

We want to get to a stage where everybody is on the road to wine knowledge and there is access to the next level of learning for any staff in any venue.

Ultimately wine can be quite a dreary subject to teach but it's so sexy when we know what we're talking about... so very impressive and so sophisticated. But talk too much and we all switch off, so it's a very delicate subject to get right. You may be informed and know a great deal about wine, but as I say to everybody at Wine School, don't become a bore! Don't talk too much about wine, don't become one of those people we all dislike talking to, don't use 20 words when three will do; and please, please, please don't become one of those nauseating sommeliers that we all really hate!

Wine events

The wine clubs have kicked off in earnest since the New Year with one every week somewhere. They have gone through a bit of a makeover as we become more creative and are not even called wine club any more...! Open to all with traditional and new attendees alike, the new wine events will draw from the creativity of each House and their wine departments to create bespoke events to suit all houses. Watch this space for Christopher's next trip to a house near you, where you may see him at the next event or just hanging out. All his events are also listed at www.houseseven.com



WILL FULLER, A WAITER AT SHOREDITCH HOUSE, AT WINE SCHOOL



Thinking while drinking

Christopher Cooper's top tips for front-of-house staff on how to become more confident about wine

The three magic words – the three words to remember about every wine that help you describe it succinctly

You're not wrong – if it tastes of apples then say it tastes of apples!
There are no wrong answers

Build up your portfolio – think about the flavours that we taste and smell every day and apply them to the wines you taste

Be honest – don't be afraid to say you like or dislike something but remember, is it you that's drinking it?

It's not rocket science – wine isn't something that's beyond anyone's grasp so stick at it and often you'll be surprised how much you do know