

## What's up with all the wine at Anajak Thai? It's an L.A. jewel, but don't sleep on these bottles from its massive list



Three guys and their wine: Anajak chef and co-owner Justin Pichetrungsri, center, with John Cerasulo, left, and new wine director Ian Krupp.

(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

Wine, wine everywhere: bottles stacked on bottles, crowding every spare surface space, taking every inch of unclaimed countertop, packed like sardines between the tables, layered like a phalanx three soldiers deep atop the bar. That's more or less the scene at Anajak Thai, the lauded second-generation Sherman Oaks Thai restaurant that has become one of the premier destinations for drinking wine in Southern California the same way people fall in love: first in drips and drabs, and then all at once.



Chef-owner Justin Pichetrungsri, grilling prawns in the alley for his tasting menu, straddles tradition and innovation at Anajak Thai in Sherman Oaks.

(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

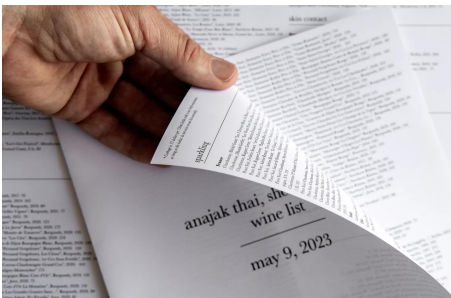
Chef Justin Pichetrungsri's Ventura Boulevard dining room the L.A. Times' [2022 Restaurant of the Year](#) effortlessly twins traditional Thai dishes with wild-eyed innovation, subverting norms and inventing new forms (Thai Taco Tuesdays, Thai omakase and so forth). Pichetrungsri is also a [James Beard finalist](#) for the 2023 awards.

Less told is the story of the wine program, which has grown to the point of bursting, a cascading, antediluvian overflow of wine wine wine, which dominates the restaurant's interior tableau as a sort of none-too-subtle vinous call to arms. Diners at Anajak come for the haw mok fish curry custard, the crab fried rice and the Wagyu with jaew gastrique, but once seated



quickly find themselves wondering: What's with all the wine?

" It's almost like we've become more wine than restaurant, laughs sommelier John Cerasulo, the driving force behind the restaurant's wine program. " I think some people might wonder, you know, 'Do you have a storage problem? Is there something wrong?' But other people take one look and say, 'Wow this is the place for me.'



The wine menu, with some teeny-tiny font, lists hundreds of bottles from groundbreaking natural wines to big-name traditional vintages to relative unknowns at Anajak Thai.

(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

The experience only deepens when handed the wine list, a kaleidoscopic magic-eye puzzle of a document in teeny 4-point font. The list at Anajak veers with easy verve from boundary-breaking naturalists (Frédéric Cossard, Clos Saron, Le Coste) to benchmark traditionalist winemakers (Raveneau, Rostaing, Keller) to relative unknowns in the American market (Hermann Ludes, Emrich Schönleber, Théo Dancer), drawing on a deep bench of wines from Burgundy, Germany, the Loire Valley and beyond.

It is at once both a " natural wine list and a " traditional wine list, fusing the two seemingly opposed schools of drinking together in a way that exposes that kind of binary as silly in the first place. " I want us to be a place that rewards knowledge, says Cerasulo, " and I also want to be crowd-pleasing, and traditional, and kind of on the natty side too, but with wines that are made correctly while feeling alive and fresh. Perhaps best of all, the wines of Anajak are priced to sell, with only a portion of the markup one might encounter in other dining rooms across the city.

To hear Pichetrungsi tell it, there would be no modern version of Anajak without the wine. " Our beverage program was the first semblance of me having some form of control, he tells me. Pichetrungsi took over after his father had a stroke in 2019, leaving a promising career as a Disney Imagineer to helm the family business, and in those early days there was little to no beverage program to speak of at Anajak. " I remember we had those little faux-leather, cardboard-bound mini A-frame menus that sit on the table, Pichetrungsi recalls; by-the-glass offerings included Coppola Pinot, Kendall Jackson Chardonnay and imported plum wine filled to the top of the glass ( " the Van Nuys pour, we called it.)



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Pichetrungsri learned how to cook from his dad but fell into wine of his own volition, hanging around wine shops like [Everson Royce](#) in Pasadena and avidly consuming wine books. "I started learning about wine for me, he recalls, "but eventually I think about wine as being a potential entry point for how I might be able to influence Anajak.

"My dad was always the cook he was always the one in charge but no one could say anything about the beverage program because it didn't exist, you know?

Pichetrungsri started attending wine fairs and trade tastings, making friends in the wine industry, and dreaming of how his love of wine might someday influence Anajak. He also found a ready set of comparisons to his own life in the stories of the vignerons whose bottles he loved. "So many stories in the wine world involve children taking over from their parents, he tells me, "and sometimes it will be like, the 7th or 8th generation to do so. These stories reflect the food here, because I'm second career, I'm second generation. The wine and food are like a mirror.



At Anajak Thai, wine, wine everywhere, lots of drops to drink.

(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

When Pichetrungsi took over, he immediately began growing the wine program. Enter Cerasulo, an art-world refugee with a serious wine habit who moved to L.A. from New York right before the pandemic hit. " There's something special about how Justin thinks about wine, says Cerasulo. " It's like he eats it he *ingests* it.

Cerasulo's timing was fortuitous, as buzz around the revitalized Anajak began growing louder and louder. Coming out of pandemic anxieties, or maybe because of them, the city was ready to drink wine in a meaningful way, and L.A.'s wine scene embraced Anajak as a destination. " The press started coming in, says Cerasulo, " and all the accolades started rolling in, and Justin said, 'Hey, go for it start buying wine.' Suddenly 50 bottles becomes 70 becomes 90 until we ran out of space. Now there's a huge wine island, and the bar is inundated. ( " I trust his palate implicitly, says Pichetrungsi of his partner. " I give him a blank check.)



Diners fill the alleyway tables, where L.A.'s wine lovers have embraced Anajak as a destination.

(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

In the earliest days it was Cerasulo hand-selling bottles of \$60 wine in the alley, but now the restaurant's wine program is supported by a growing team of opinionated sommeliers who help diners navigate the experience, overseen by Ian Krupp (formerly of [Scopa](#) and [the Rose](#)), Anajak's newly appointed wine director. Cerasulo now splits time between Anajak and a wine sales position at Rosenthal Wine Merchant, an influential wine importer and distributor; Anajak's growing prestige as a wine destination has allowed the restaurant to secure coveted allocations of rare bottles from cult producers.

" The wine part of what we do has grown so much, says Pichetrungsi, " that it's almost its whole own thing outside of the food. It's no longer even about, you know, what pairs well with what dish we don't even really answer that question anymore. Who the f cares, you know? We're stoked about the food and we're stoked about the wine.

" My hope is that people will just kind of submit to the whole thing, our whole approach to wine and food, says Pichetrungsi, " and make a discovery along the way.



Anajak serves the "Jurassique Savagnin from French winemaker Théo Dancer, who has been shaking up the world of Burgundy.

(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

Anajak has become a destination not just for wine drinkers but also for winemakers the restaurant recently hosted Tomoko Kuriyama and Guillaume Bott, the duo behind the widely revered Burgundy micro-négociant label Domaine Chanterêves. Meeting his winemaker heroes has further served as proof of concept for Pichetrungsi, echoing something deeper in his connection to wine as it relates to his life and the story of Anajak. "So many of these winemakers will go off to their own careers, as winemaker children do, but slowly you'll see them come back and help the family business. They find themselves wanting to come back.

"And I can't help but think, 'Oh my God, is that me?' he says, laughing inside the bottle-stuffed dining room at Anajak, once his father's restaurant and now very much his own. "These choices we make in our lives it's like they're communicated by the wine itself.



New wine director Ian Krupp, left, sommelier John Cerasulo and chef and co-owner Justin Pichetrungsi collaborate on Anajak's wine menu.

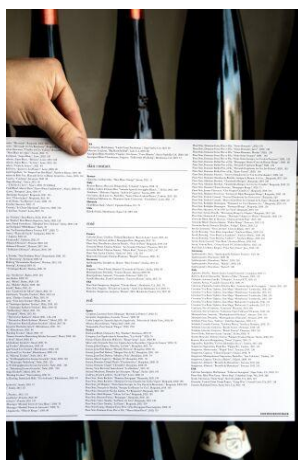
(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

### Five Wines to Try From Anajak's Remarkable List

The wine list at Anajak is a marvel. It's as though the dream of a little country restaurant with an overflowing wine list in the hills of Tuscany or on some lonely rue Bourgogne has somehow been planted along Ventura Boulevard, and paired with Thai fried chicken.

Maybe you're already familiar with the exquisite pairing of Thai food and Riesling, as pioneered in the late 20th century by influential restaurants like Lotus of Siam in Las Vegas. But the world of Thai food and wine does not begin or end there; this menu rewards exploration and knowledge. You should also feel free to put yourself in the hands of Anajak's wine team, which might even include chef Justin Pichetrungsri himself (he's been known to pick up a somm shift or two). And when in doubt, order a bottle. We'd always rather see you with a bottle here than a glass, says sommelier John Cerasulo. Because "that's the way the winemaker would want it."

**Frederic Savart "1er Cru Extra Brut L'Ouverture Champagne NV** Champagne cruises alongside nearly every food imaginable, but this taut, sharp expression of sparkling Pinot Noir seems ready-made for Anajak's rightly famous Thai fried chicken (maybe even better with the caviar supplement).



The wine menu at Anajak Thai: a vast array of options in a teeny, tiny font, so to be safe, bring a pair of reading glasses.

(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)

**Stein "Weihwasser Mosel Riesling 2020** Yes, Riesling tastes phenomenal with Thai food, and it makes a ready foil for dishes like panang beef with snap peas and makrut lime, or Pichetrungsri's pitch-perfect rendition of his father's drunken noodles. This bottle of Stein, from Germany's hallowed Mosel region, tastes utterly alive, clean and cool like licking a wet rock after a rainstorm and just a touch sweet without being overwhelming or veering into dessert territory.

**Chateau Le Puy "Emilien Bordeaux 2018** For a restaurant and wine list that upends expectations, reach for this definitional natural Bordeaux: the same family has owned the estate for 400 years, and they've *never* used chemical pesticides from a region whose pleasures have been more or less skipped over by many younger wine drinkers who find themselves allergic to anything Robert Parker once liked. Le Puy is famously ethereal, light as a feather and vividly elegant. "



Burgundy-like is sometimes thrown around in reference to this wine; that isn't quite right, but nor are comparisons to the estate's famous Right Bank Bordeaux neighbors, including Pétrus and Cheval-Blanc. Instead Le Puy is some other third thing, occupying a particularly edgy place on a modern wine list like Anajak's, where Bordeaux for natural wine lovers makes a certain cheeky sense. This would drink effortlessly with the entire menu on Thai Taco Tuesday (in particular the uni tostada).

**Emrich Schönleber "Frühlingsplätzchen Grosses Gewächs Nahe 2020** Wine programs like Anajak's offer difficult-to-find bottles, often obtained via allocation, a system whereby favorite clients like restaurants and bars can obtain sought-after wines from importers and distributors. Emrich Schönleber's Rieslings are as expressive as they are rare, like drinking a peach-pear LaCroix filtered through limestone. To see a bottle like this just hanging out on a wine list in the Valley is downright subversive.

**Theo Dancer "Bourgogne Chardonnay Burgundy 2021** Another tough-to-find bottle, at Anajak it's being offered at a fraction of the price you'd expect to see on a list in New York or London. Clean and lovely white Burgundy from one of the region's most buzzed-about young winemakers, who recently took over the domaine from his father, like the story of Anajak in Chardonnay form.



(Mariah Tauger / Los Angeles Times)