

A man with glasses and a blue short-sleeved button-down shirt is smiling. He is holding a large, white, curved saber in his right hand and a dark green bottle of champagne in his left hand. He is standing in a kitchen with white cabinets and a window with white shutters in the background.

From lunch meetings to life celebrations, our events almost always involve a culinary experience.

# A Legal Decanting of the Culinary Arts

by Joseph VanFleet, Howard & Howard

With proper training, a saber can be used to open a bottle of Champagne by slicing off the tip of the bottle.

When I was presented with the opportunity to write a column for *Peoria Magazine's* annual food & culinary arts issue, I accepted the assignment with no hesitation. How difficult can it be, I thought, to write a thematic and interesting article bringing together business law and culinary arts? As I began to think about my assignment, a second question hit me: *What in the world does a middle-aged trial lawyer know about food and culinary arts—and how can I tie these topics together?*

## A JOURNEY OF IDEATION

Suddenly, I was struggling for ideas and knew I needed help. So, I called my old law school classmate Jude Sullivan, a leading member of our firm's Mergers & Acquisitions group in Chicago. Jude is one of the smartest and most clever people I know. We've enjoyed some great business meals over the years, and I know he holds a serious palate for high-end cuisine. He most certainly can help with ideas for my article.

I called him, eager to write down all of his ideas, only to hear him respond with an abrupt "Sorry, but I got nothing." Then he laughed and reminded me of our days at the University of Illinois, where I once proclaimed that all food pairs well with a bottle of Rolling Rock and a Flyin' Illini basketball game. But I was pretty sure today's readers wouldn't be too interested in my "fun on a

budget" approach as a student. Sadly, we came up short on other ideas.

Next I contacted Pat McCarthy in Michigan, another good friend who chairs our Litigation Group. His reaction was much like Jude's, pointing out that he is not an expert on this subject before adding, "We have certainly solved a lot of problems over good meals, along with the right beverages, and a twist of perfect timing." While Pat made a good point, this was still not the help I needed.

Growing more desperate, I decided to reach out to our law firm's top culinary resource, Dan Bliss. Dan is not only an accomplished intellectual property lawyer in our Las Vegas office; he is also a certified *sommelier* in his life outside the firm, who crosses paths with some of the best-known names in food and wine. What a resource, I thought. Dan will think of something for sure!

While Dan was excited about the concept and requested time to think about it, he also struggled over specific ideas for an article. He canvassed our firm's Las Vegas office, which is well-stocked with highly experienced people at all levels of culinary enjoyment. Despite his best efforts, in our follow-up discussion all Dan could convey was an entertaining, memory-lane reminiscence over dozens (if not hundreds) of inspiring meals

and social gatherings. In the end, even the certified sommelier had trouble tying our industries together.

## ANSWERS CLOSE TO HOME

I found myself approaching my deadline with no idea what to write, when my long-time friend and partner in Peoria, Jeff Sorenson, asked me how the article was coming along. Not very well, I told him. I haven't even started. I can't even develop a theme or a title.

"Don't you have a wine collection," Jeff reminded me, "and isn't it a really big one?" Jeff was right. I've been collecting wine for 20 years. I have over 2,000 bottles in a temperature-controlled, humidity-regulated, custom-made wine cellar in my basement.

"Isn't there some connection with your wine collection that you can write about," he added, "like maybe the reason you collected all that wine in the first place?" *Thank you, Jeff, you're a genius.*

And with that, the answer suddenly hit me; the explanation is different for each of us. Everyone I talked to was right in their own thinking. A culinary experience isn't about the beginning, or the end, or finding a consistent label you can assign to the final product. It's much more than that. It's all about the unique experience itself, like a painting is so much more than any individual brush stroke guiding the artist to the final piece.

## ENHANCING LIFE'S MOMENTS

True culinary artists strive to formulate and execute a fulfilling

*chef d'oeuvre* as often as possible, and for as many people as conceivable. This is no easy task, as those of us who line up to enjoy the end result are often looking for something different. At times we want to engage in problem-solving. Other times we want to be entertained. Sometimes we're looking for companionship. Often the goal is merely to escape the boredom of a generic, meat-and-potatoes world.

I have benefited from many great occasions involving food and wine, and I am somewhat embarrassed to have struggled with this and failed to appreciate the impact this industry has on all of us. Our graduations, weddings and celebrations of every kind almost always involve a culinary experience surrounding it. I have collected more than 2,000 bottles of wine to facilitate, share and enhance as many of these wonderful experiences as I can.

Unfortunately, no matter how we define it, life is never going to be altogether perfect. Life does, however, allow us to experience a few perfect moments. For most of us, the culinary experience helps to promote these moments. To all the wonderful professionals in our local food and culinary community, thank you for helping us realize so many of our perfect moments. ■

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