

Message in a Bottle

Ivan Ruiz has poured everything he ever learned about wine into his successful neighborhood shop, The Wine List of Summit

By Sean Romanoff

Anyone who meets Ivan Ruiz, a self-professed wine geek, immediately understands that great knowledge and passion stand behind the endless racks and countless bottles in his store, The Wine List of Summit. And it's easy to assume that his is a typical rags-to-riches immigrant story. However, Ruiz's life is not so simply defined, because he didn't start out in rags, and his success is remarkable for anyone, whether a native of this country or not.

Ruiz grew up in Columbia with his father, a successful businessman who would take you Ivan with him on weekend business meetings. "My father was the first of many mentors in my life," Ruiz said. But Ruiz admits he was a difficult teen and was misbehaving enough that his father sent him to military school.

"Unfortunately I was with other rich kids who were also acting up, so I got worse," Ruiz said. That's when his father made the decision to send him to the United States. "In South America, movies gave kids the impression that every place was like suburbia, so that how he sold it," Ruiz recalled.

On December 10, 1982, at the age of 17, Ruiz flew into Newark Airport on a first-class, one-way ticket. He left the luxuries of his childhood behind him and moved into his mother's small fifth floor apartment in Elizabeth, where he shared a bedroom with his

four brothers. “I wanted to go home every minute I was here the first week,” Ruiz said.

Despite being homesick, he was soon looking for work. “My first job was at White Castle flipping burgers,” Ruiz said. A girl he worked with told him about another job she had as a hostess at The Hunt Club in The Grand Summit Hotel. “She said I should ask for a job as a bus boy, but my English wasn’t very good and I thought she said ‘passport.’ Everyone laughed when I asked and the man said, ‘I think you mean you want to be a bus boy.’ That’s how I got the job.”

In the meantime, Ruiz wanted to go to college, but his grades weren’t good enough to get into a four-year university, so he enrolled in the hotel and restaurant management program at Middlesex County College. Initially he was doing so poorly there that the dean actually suggested he find another field. Years later, Ruiz would help rewrite the hospitality curriculum for the college.

As for his career, Ruiz continued to advance at The Grand Summit, getting promoted from bus boy to waiter and eventually to manager of The Hunt Club. “They had high-profile chefs and managers at the hotel and they really taught me the importance of doing the job the right way,” Ruiz said. His time there also marked the beginning of a relationship with the hotel’s owner, Marshall Weinerman, who would eventually bring him to The Wine List.

Ruiz continued to collaborate with some of the best chefs and restaurateurs in the metropolitan area, working at such fine restaurants as The Ryland Inn, Stage House Inn, Picholine, and Patria. “I learned a lot at each place,” Ruiz said. “I took the job at Picholine as the captain de fromage because my other passion,

besides wine, is cheese and I wanted to learn as much as I could about it.”

In 1997, Ruiz left the restaurant business and moved fully into wine when he was offered a job with renowned wine importer Robert Chadderon. This position included three months of intensive work at some of the best wineries in France, which Ruiz looked at as an incredible learning opportunity. “Robert Chadderon had turned me down when I asked for a chance like this a few years earlier, so when he made the offer three years later I jumped at it. I don’t think he made an offer like that to anyone else before or since,” Ruiz said. This experience proved invaluable when Ruiz started his own import business in 2000, where he worked until he heard from an old friend last year.

“Mr. Weinerman contacted me and asked me to look at his store,” Ruiz said. The two had remained friends over the years and Ruiz was glad that Weinerman had gone to the many restaurants where Ruiz had worked during that time. The two would often marvel over how Ruiz had started as a bus boy. Now Weinerman wanted to offer his wine and gourmet food shop on Springfield Avenue, Town & Country, to Ruiz.

The space had been beautifully renovated with exposed brick, hardwood floors, finely constructed displays, and all of the high-tech climate controls one would dream of having at a premiere wine store. Weinerman was ready to move on and he wanted Ruiz to take over the space. Even with no retail experience, it was an opportunity Ruiz couldn’t pass up.

In fact, Ruiz uses his vast restaurant experience to help him grow his retail business. “We’re really learning and growing and with

our new web site, this is shaping up to be our best year,” Ruiz said.

Once at one of the restaurants where he worked, Ruiz believed he had impeccably prepared the staff and was hoping to get an eventual four-star rating. Eventually a review came from *The New York Times*, and he was shocked to get only three stars. The reviewer later revealed to Ruiz that, while the food and wine service were impeccable, there was a pretentiousness that detracted from the overall presentation. Ruiz was struck by the idea and it changed his attitude forever. He quickly altered his approach and later got his coveted four-star review.

The lesson was well learned because it’s this lack of pretense, where it so easily could exist, that makes The Wine List a comfort to anyone who might enjoy a glass of wine.