

Words with the World's Best

Isa Bal talks about wine

story and photo by Fred Minnick

There are sommeliers with talent. Then there's Isa Bal, Head Sommelier of Michelin three-star The Fat Duck in Bray, Berkshire, England, arguably the best restaurant in the world. The Turkish native won the 2008 Best Sommelier of Europe competition, organized by the Association de la Sommelierie Internationale.

Bal's humble roots and sweet personality do not allow him to get caught up in all the hype. He got his start in 1999 at The Vineyard Hotel at Stockcross in Newberry, Berkshire, England. In this exclusive TASTING PANEL interview, Bal tells us his story and gives American sommeliers a few tips.

THE TASTING PANEL: Why are you passionate about wine?

ISA BAL: I love being interactive with people, talking to them, listening to them and finding out what they like and dislike.

TP: At The Fat Duck, how do you interact with customers?

IB: I go to each table and see the customers at various points of their dinner. Some people are a bit easier to interrupt. Sometimes people are talking business or something else, and you want to be quiet and discreet.

TP: What was it like winning Europe's best sommelier?

IB: I was numb for a few minutes. It's a feeling that I wish on any sommelier. It's just great.

TP: And how have things changed since?

IB: I used to be very busy because of The Fat Duck. Now, I am busier be-

cause I get to visit more wineries and industry events than before. It's also a strain on my family. I'm not saying that in a negative way. The award is very positive, but you get very busy.

TP: What's it like to be an industry celebrity of sorts?

IB: I try to keep it cool and quiet, but at the same time I don't want to seem to be arrogant to people. It's not what I am, and I would hate to be arrogant. At the same time, being a celebrity is cool, but I am a sommelier and I specialize in wine and drinks in general. That's what I do. Does that deserve a celebrity status? Maybe. That is fine, especially if I get the attention from younger sommeliers who ask me for advice.

TP: What kind of advice do you give young sommeliers?

IB: One thing I say to them is do not be afraid of setting your focus high, because it really is not your destination that matters; it is how you get there. So enjoy that ride to the destination, and at the end, if your destination changes slightly, then so be it. Make sure you enjoy it while you are getting there, because you put a lot of time and effort into it and if you just put all your eggs in one basket, you may end up being disappointed.

TP: The world is feeling a lot of pressure from the economy. What advice would you give to sommeliers and bar owners about their wines right now?

IB: I think they are not immune to it. I can only say stick to what you do and try to do much better than you normally do. Downgrading on quality should not be an option. ■

