Dan Davis
Wine Guy

At the venerable Commander's Palace in New Orleans, there is no such thing as a head sommelier. Dan Davis, the man who oversees the impressive 2,600-bottle list, is instead simply known as the "Wine Guy"—a moniker that embodies the restaurant's philosophy of making sure guests enjoy every aspect of their dining experience without intimidation. "We have a very serious wine program that doesn't take itself too seriously," Davis explains. "Our cellar is stocked with some of the finest wines in the world and verticals that would make just about anyone jealous, but none of that does you any good if people are scared to order wine."

Although his title doesn't say so explicitly, Davis is a Certified Sommelier with the Court of Master Sommeliers, and his work at Commander's Palace displays a depth of both managerial and wine-related experience. Originally from the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, Davis attended the University of New Orleans, where he was a history major. While still in school, he began working at Palace Café in New Orleans as a waiter—his first foray into the the hospitality industry. "I had never even been in a fine-dining restaurant until that point," he notes.

After two years at Palace Café, Davis worked as a bartender at a number of different French Quarter establishments before working as managing partner in a small bakery and restaurant in the city's Warehouse District (now known as the Arts District), a half-block from renowned Chef Emeril Lagasse's flagship restaurant. When Davis left the bakery in the late '90s he took an entry-level job as a busser at Emeril's, which led to an eight-year career at the restaurant. It was during his time at the restaurant that he began to educate himself about wine, working as lead waiter in the Wine Room, a private dining room for 14 in the wine cellar. "I knew nothing worth knowing about wine before working at Emeril's," he says. "I began to try wines every day, working from a list that had over 1,200 selections. I would always bring books with me to work so that I could learn more about whatever we were pouring."

After working as the general manager at Emeril's restaurant on Miami Beach, Davis returned to New Orleans in 2005 to work at Commander's Palace … just before Hurricane Katrina devastated the city and closed the restaurant for 13 months. During the reconstruction, Davis took the helm at Commander's Palace's sister restaurant, Café Adelaide and its Swizzle Stick Bar.

In 2007, he finally had the chance to return to Commander's, where he ran the bar program for a year before transitioning back to working with what he loved most: wine. "New Orleans is all about enjoying life, and part of that is enjoying great wine," he says. "At Commander's, we are not going to do anything halfway, so we are very much committed to making sure we offer diners great wine and cocktails, because it's an integral part of their overall experience with us." Under Davis's management, Commander's Palace has received Wine Spectator's Grand Award, a distinction shared by only 75 restaurants in the world, as well as Wine Enthusiast magazine's highest awards.

For the former history major, working with wine also appeals on other levels. "One of the most exciting things about the world of wine is that I will never know it all," Davis says. "I am extremely passionate about learning, and there is so much history in the world of wine." Learning extends to his time outside of work, as well. In addition to hosting the Court of Master Sommeliers classes and exams each summer, Davis is an active part of New Orleans's wine community, has served on the board for the New Orleans Wine and Food Experience and founded a nonprofit dedicated to wine and spirits education.