



III FORKS

BY CARRIE WILLIAMS

NOT YOUR AVERAGE STEAKHOUSE

Tucked away from the hustle and bustle of Michigan Avenue on Fair Boulevard lies a hidden gem: III Forks. Open for over a year, it's named after a geographic region in Fort Worth/Dallas, Texas, where the original restaurant opened in 1998. III Forks is anything but your average steakhouse, and Maitre d'/Wine Director Lance Gresak tells us why.

"A traditional steakhouse serves just a little seafood, but times are changing and we want to offer more than that," Mr. Gresak says of III Forks, which has six additional locations between Texas and Florida. "Five years ago at our Austin location, my district manager and a few others got together and said, 'Let's put a burger on the menu. Or how about chicken fried prime rib and French dip? Let's cater to everyone.' Then one day, a group came in and ordered burgers with three \$600 bottles of wine. We want people to come to III Forks and experience all we have to offer."

Everyday diners enjoy meals in either the main dining room, bar area or rooftop lounge — which is open March through October and closed for the winter season. "We may close the rooftop, but we're always prepared for it to be open when the weather is beautiful," admits Mr. Gresak.

When it comes to dining indoors, Mr. Gresak suggests making a reservation no matter which day of the week you choose to visit III Forks. "You want to ensure yourself a seat, and you can even choose where you want to sit when you make your reservation," he says, noting there are also spaces for private parties.

From the most intimate gathering to the largest soiree, III Forks offers many spaces for a variety of parties. Choose between the Wine Room (eight guests), Poker Room (12), Captains Room (36), Legends Room (78) or Rooftop Lounge (100-plus). "There are times when people like to go from the rooftop down into the main dining room, so we offer a lot of different options," affirms Mr. Gresak, who's been a connoisseur of wine since his days in Austin.

"Years ago, I was surrounded by first, second and third level sommeliers, and my friend had wine cellar so whatever I wanted was always available," shares the III Forks wine director. "It was infectious! I remember watching University of Texas versus University of Southern California

championship football game with my friends. We were all wearing our jerseys, eating cheese and drinking wine. I looked around and said, 'We're the only men in America doing this.' That's when I knew I loved wine."

III Forks can house 5,000 bottles of wine on the premises, with up to 4,000 red wines in the main cellar and the rest stored throughout the restaurant. And with 321 labels available to guests, III Forks has invested in a strategic system for keeping track of inventory. "We have a program on the iPad called GrapePad," reveals Mr. Gresak. "We began using it at the Austin location about five years ago and brought it to Chicago. It's connected to all of the computers throughout the restaurant. Whenever a bottle is removed, it's removed from GrapePad and all the computers. I can also plug in orders I receive during the day and it bumps up the number."

It doesn't stop there. Rather than being presented with a traditional paper wine list, guests are handed an iPad so they too can use GrapePad to learn the specifics about each wine, including information on the region and the winemakers. Once they select a particular bottle, guests can then send themselves an email with all the information about the wine they had at dinner. "And when any wine is out of stock, it doesn't appear on the iPad," affirms Mr. Gresak.

When asked about his favorite wines, Mr. Gresak says he goes for value. "I love for everyone be able to achieve that great bottle of wine without having to reach deep in their pockets. One of my favorites is Justin Cabernet from Paso Robles, California. It's \$49 and goes well with New York Strip Steak."

When all is said and done, what the people at III Forks care about most is preparing simple, flavorful dishes and pleasing guests. "We're all about getting the ingredients perfect without trying to be too cute, and we love, love, love our customers," shares Mr. Gresak. "We just love to talk to people, hang out and show we care about their experience at III Forks." ■

 Learn more about the wines housed in III Forks by visiting www.TCWMag.com/food-and-wine.