



In partnership with *Domaine Bousquet, O'Neal (pictured at left) and his Black Wine bandmates plan to donate a portion of the proceeds from the wine sold at their shows to research on Crohn's, a disease that's impacted their lead vocalist, Robert Jackson.*



Leaving It All on the Floor

TIMOTHY O'NEAL RISES TO MYRIAD CHALLENGES AS THE WINE DIRECTOR AT FHIMA'S IN MINNEAPOLIS, MN

WHEN TIMOTHY O'NEAL heard about a potential job opening while playing pool at a Minneapolis dive bar last summer, he didn't think it would lead to the most exciting and multifaceted professional opportunity of his life: a post as the wine director and sommelier at downtown Moroccan-French restaurant Fhima's that would have him simultaneously serving as the official somm at the Minnesota Timberwolves' stadium and, for an upcoming concept, conceptualizing what may eventually be the Twin Cities' largest wine list.

Granted, once you're in the orbit of charismatic chef David Fhima, O'Neal discovered, surprise duties like selecting wines for the fans and suite members at the Target Center or sifting through Fhima's 10,000-bottle collection of rare and high-end bottlings in preparation for that new concept—an all-French, multimillion-dollar, three-story restaurant set to open next year—are all part of the appeal of what's "certainly the most complex sommelier position of my career," he says. His first order of business was to completely revamp the Fhima's wine program to suit both its menu, which he describes as bursting with "flavor and considerable spice," and its multicultural clientele who'd previously, lacking a somm to guide them, gravitated toward cocktails. When he started, "it was an event if a bottle went out," he says; now, just a few months later, wine sales are up "like eightfold." "It's a remarkable difference [that shows] what having a sommelier in a restaurant like that can do," O'Neal says.

The same applies to the Target Center, where Fhima oversees the concessions menus. Looking to improve their wine offerings, stadium executives entrusted O'Neal with picking a flagship red and white from their new partner, E. & J.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TIMOTHY O'NEAL

Timothy O'Neal with his boss, chef David Fhima, whose namesake restaurant has prepared more than 600,000 meals for Minnesotans in need over the course of the pandemic in partnership with Minneapolis-St. Paul food bank Second Harvest Heartland.

Gallo—he opted for the Louis M. Martini Sonoma County Cabernet Sauvignon and J Vineyards & Winery Chardonnay after tasting through 40-plus selections—as well as serving as an on-demand somm both in its courtside dining area and its suites, which will allow him more flexibility to showcase a variety of wines through, say, multicourse pairing dinners. Feedback has already been overwhelmingly positive: "Guest experience goes through the roof with a qualified sommelier in a suite that appreciates wine," O'Neal says, adding that he expects "word will spread" among fans—not to mention other NBA

franchises, which can stand to benefit from evolving their beverage programs and boosting sales in the process.

One could argue that it's all part of the "LeBron effect," or the rising interest in wine among athletes in recent years: something O'Neal has seen firsthand as he rubs elbows with the players, who often come into Fhima's after games and rank among the many patrons who have responded enthusiastically to his pairing suggestions. As a result, he now keeps a "players' box" in the cellar with selections tailored to various teammates' preferences. "The way they swirl wine is vigorous, like they've all been trained or they all have swirling contests," O'Neal says with a laugh. "They are familiar with the terminology and I think they look at it as a little competition to see who's drinking what."

Before joining Fhima's, O'Neal was staying busy during the pandemic with his bandmates, writing material for their group Black Wine (on Instagram @blackwinerocks), a name he says is "a throwback to Malbec from Cahors being the darkest ever produced." They're currently working on a full-length album that's a "blend of rap, rock, blues, and punk," not to mention preparing for a December show at iconic Minneapolis venue First Avenue and finalizing a partnership deal with, fittingly, Argentine Malbec producer Domaine Bousquet. "If you can't get signed to a record label anymore, and your name is Black Wine, maybe go for a wine label for a little support," he says.

Whether he's spreading the good word of wine in a stadium packed with fans or onstage at a gig, O'Neal feels like he's "in the prime of my existence" after weathering the uncertainty of the pandemic: "I'm doing exactly what I've wanted to do." SJ