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April 9, 2008

## Wine Bars Grow Up and Squeeze In

By ERIC ASIMOV

IT was a Wednesday night around 7:30 and Casellula, a small, boxy wine bar in Clinton, was filling up. Patrons packed the seats at the small polished wood bar and the inexpensive wood tables, trading sips of wine, sharing beautifully composed cheese selections and passing plates back and forth.

No sharing for me, though. My open sandwich, made with morcilla, a delectable Spanish blood sausage, layered over multicolored roasted peppers, was too good to sacrifice a bite. I washed it down with a gutsy aglianico del Vulture, a nice combination, and hungrily eyed an intriguing dessert selection, French toast pudding, made with applewood-smoked bacon and spiced maple syrup.

No question about it, wine bars are no longer what they used to be. Throughout the restaurant-saturated precincts of New York, wine bars have been proliferating like latter-day Starbucks, purveying their wines by the glass and simple bites with typically homespun charms.

At last count, nywinebarguide.com, a Web site devoted to tracking the city's wine bars, had found 131 in the city, although Ray Kasbarian, its chief executive, conceded that the number was out of date.

Most of them seem stamped out of the now ubiquitous Italian mold, offering platters of salumi and cheese, panini and a dozen glasses of red and white.

But many, like Casellula, have stepped it up, forging identities that distinguish them from the more mundane masses.

Xai Xai, on West 51st Street, a block away from Casellula, specializes in South African snacks served with South African wines. It, too, is often packed.

Cafe Katja on the Lower East Side has an excellent list of Austrian wines and bites like soft, fat pretzels served with two mustards and a tangy cheese spread.

Pata Negra in the East Village serves Spanish hams -- glistening jamón Ibérico is among the world's great delicacies -- cheeses and tidbits, with Spanish wines, of course.

Gottino in the West Village has an Italian theme, but its creative menu goes way beyond the salumi-and-cheese places, with enticing dishes like sweet-and-tart beets, cooked in parchment and bathed in a bright horseradish sauce.

Paradoxically, wine can sometimes seem like an afterthought. Too many wine bars have inconsequential selections, as dull as another plate of stale prosciutto. But the good ones always offer something to intrigue even the most jaded palate.

At Cavatappo, a storefront on the Upper East Side barely bigger than a breadboard, the selections on a recent visit included a couple of earthy lambruscos, and while the nibbles are largely Italian, the wines include the superb Gaia Thalassitis, from the Greek island of Santorini.

Solex, a cavernous French-themed place in the East Village, offers wines from lesser-known appellations like Arbois and Savoie, along with good selections from Austria and Germany.

Black Mountain Wine House in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, has an eclectic assortment that includes Monteverdine, the superb Tuscan producer, and R. López de Heredia, a singular Rioja.

Well-known chefs and restaurateurs have jumped in. Jody Williams, chef at Morandi in the West Village, is the chef and a partner in Gottino. Marco Canora and Paul Grieco of Hearth and Insieme have opened Terroir in the East Village. Blue Ribbon has a wine bar on Downing Street. The biggest name of all of them, Daniel Boulud, has opened Bar Boulud, a wine bar more in name than style.

With so many wine bars opening, standing out from the crowd has resulted in some unexpected blends of genre. Ayza on West 31st Street bills itself as a wine and chocolate bar. The sign for Buceo 95 on West 95th Street reads "Vins/Tapas." And Brian Keyser, an owner of Casellula, insists, "We don't think of ourselves as a wine bar; we're a cheese bar."

Where wine bars were once a novelty in New York, their very unremarkableness today indicates how they've become an accepted part of the New York landscape, local hangouts like the corner bar or the coffee spot. It was different 25 years ago when the opening of a wine bar here was seen as a sign of cultural arrival.

Bartenders tended to preface each glass with extended lectures on winemaking techniques or soil content. With great self-satisfaction wine bars would spotlight their gadgets, like the Cruvinet, which supposedly kept open bottles fresh by enveloping them in nitrogen, hence avoiding oxidation.

Consumers were encouraged to order wines in academically inspired flights, with names like Three Sides of Cabernet Sauvignon or A Study in Riesling. They seemed aimed more at teaching customers that wine was gravely important rather than satisfying them.

Most of these early places lasted a few years and closed. A new wave would open and the cycle would repeat.

It wasn't until the late 1990s that a different kind of wine bar took root in New York. Relaxed, unpretentious Italian places like Ino on Bedford Street and Bar Veloce and Il Posto Accanto in the East Village familiarized New Yorkers to words like panini, tramezzini and quartino.

There was no proselytizing, no lectures. They simply served wine and let customers set the pace.

The low-key vibe and the easy prices made these places appealing to consumers regardless of their wine orientation, especially to women who wanted to avoid the testosterone-driven pickup scene at bars. That is still true today.

But far more crucial to the latest wave of wine bar openings has been the soaring cost of opening a restaurant in New York City.

"Economics is the overriding factor," said Mr. Grieco, an owner of Hearth and Insieme, who just opened Terroir on East 12th Street. "A wine bar can fit into a footprint that a restaurant couldn't. The cost of real estate, the cost of labor, all the equipment that you need to get a restaurant up and going: a wine bar allows an aspiring restaurateur entree without breaking the bank."

Less than a block from Terroir, my friend Rafael Mateo opened Pata Negra in February. Mr. Mateo had long nursed a desire to open a restaurant while he worked as a schoolteacher in East Harlem. Finally in 2006 he made the break, first overseeing the wine program at La Nacional on West 14th Street, then managing Ostia, a tapas bar in Greenwich Village.

But he thirsted for a place that would be entirely his own. A full restaurant, though, would overstep his bank account.

"Unless you're a known chef or have financial backers, you're more out of your mind opening a restaurant than becoming a schoolteacher," he said.

Working within his small budget he found a storefront with an affordable lease on East 12th Street. Gas ranges and the venting they require are an enormous expense, so he restricted himself to an electric convection oven and a sandwich press. No more than three people, including himself, work at any one time.

His vision was based on the small Barcelona bars he fell in love with years ago, specializing in, as he put it, "beautiful sliced ham, beautiful cheese and great wine."

"In the first month I broke even, which any restaurant owner will tell you is a dream," he said. "That's beyond successful to me, and in March I doubled what I did in February, which is great."

Mr. Keyser of Casellula had also wanted to open his own restaurant. Eight years in fine dining establishments like Chanterelle and the Modern had fatigued him, but he too had to rein in his ambitions to fit a realistic Manhattan budget.

"A full kitchen was not reasonable," he said. "A lot of square feet was not reasonable."

The potential for savings is not lost on restaurant entrepreneurs like Jim Mamary, who owns six restaurants in Brooklyn, including Patois, Pacifico and Pomme de Terre. He opened Black Mountain Wine House with the idea of eliminating as many expenses as possible, so he has no gas, no heat except the fireplace, one dishwasher and no prep cooks.

"It's amazing how you can control your costs," he said.

While wine is no longer treated as pedantically as before, the educational impulse can still be felt. Most wine bars typically pour tastes of several wines so customers can decide which to order, and they are poised to offer information as requested.

Social barriers are even broken as complete strangers offer one another tastes from their glasses. Meanwhile, proprietors like Mr. Grieco of Terroir are simply becoming more creative in how they dispense information.

"I think we've become a lot more subversive in our application of knowledge to guests," he said, with more enthusiasm than can be contained in Terroir's 500 square feet. Plans for T-shirts of wine heroes, wine bingo and wine merit badges spill out in rapid succession. "If you don't offer education I don't think you're a wine bar," he said.

While most wine bars are concentrated in outlying neighborhoods, the mystery, said Tyler Colman, who follows wine bars on his blog [drvino.com](http://drvino.com), is not why the Lower East Side may be the wine bar capital of America, but why there are so few wine bars in Midtown Manhattan.

"You would think people would be spilling out from offices," he said. "As profitable as they may be, there are limits. Obviously, selling coffee is more profitable."

Recipe: Beets With Horseradish Cream Adapted from Jody Williams Time: About 1 hour, plus overnight refrigeration

1 pound small or medium red beets, washed and stemmed

1 bottle dry red wine

1 cup sliced shallots  
2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed  
2 bay leaves  
3 sprigs of thyme  
Cracked pepper  
Salt

1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil

1 piece fresh horseradish

1 cup crème fraîche.

1. Place beets in a saucepan, cover with water and boil until soft, about 45 minutes. Drain beets, let them rest until cool enough to handle, then peel and dice them. Place in bowl.
2. While beets are cooking, pour wine into another saucepan, add shallots, garlic, bay leaves, thyme and cracked pepper. Boil over medium-high heat until reduced by half, about 20 minutes.
3. Pour wine marinade over beets, add salt to taste and drizzle with extra virgin olive oil. Stir, cover and refrigerate overnight.
4. The next day, heat oven to 400 degrees. Place beets and marinade in center of a 12-inch square of foil or parchment. Fold foil or parchment over beets and crimp edges together to seal. Bake 12 minutes, until beets are warm.
5. While beets bake, grate 2 tablespoons of fresh horseradish and mix with crème fraîche and a pinch of salt. Serve beets warm with crème fraîche on the side.

Yield: 4 servings.

Recipe: Walnut Pesto Crostini Adapted from Jody Williams Time: 15 minutes

1 cup shelled walnuts  
1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese  
1 garlic clove, peeled and crushed  
3 sprigs of thyme, cleaned  
Salt  
Splash of sherry vinegar  
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil  
2 tablespoons minced sun-dried tomatoes

1 loaf country bread, sliced.

1. In food processor, coarsely grind walnuts, cheese, garlic, thyme, salt and vinegar. Stir in oil and tomatoes.

2. Grill or toast bread. While hot, top each slice with a heaping teaspoon of pesto.

Yield: 12 servings.

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