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Stellar Cellars

Sommelier-at-large talks about Philly's best wine bars

BY BETH D'ADDONO

Wine lists can be such a yawn. Too often a restaurant wine list is as hefty as a phone book and not quite as creative. But it doesn't have to be that way.

"When I read a wine list, I'm looking for a menu that is thoughtful and makes an effort at variety," said Marnie Old, a certified advanced sommelier and wine educator. Old, who consults for the likes of Stephen Starr restaurants, the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board and comedian Bill Cosby, takes the seriousness out of drinking and buying wine. Despite her vast knowledge, Old isn't a bit stuffy about her favorite beverage. Her philosophy is simple. Rule number one about drinking wine is: drink what you like. (Rule number two is read rule number one again.)

"Variety doesn't mean a big giant wine list with hundreds of selections. While a list with three or four or eight hundred choices may have a place at a very high end restaurant with a tremendous range of changing seasonal dishes, it's not necessary at most places," she said.

How do you know if a wine list is bright and forward thinking, or downright ho-hum? "Don't just look at the grape variety (chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon) but look at the region of origin," she said. "If all the white wines are California chardonnays, that's one-dimensional. That means they are all from a warm climate, with high

sugar content, and they are all barrel fermented. I don't bother reading any further."

A diverse wine list will mine the globe, perhaps offering a Spanish Alvarinho or a German dry Riesling. Or if the restaurant specializes in a particular country of origin, like Italy, regional wines will add spice to the list.

"What I say is, order and drink what you can afford to by the glass and by the bottle. If you're not sure about a certain wine, ask the server or the bartender for a taste. It's tough to sell people on a product they haven't had a chance to sample. The good news is, you don't need a four-year degree to know what tastes good."

Here are our picks for best wine bars in town. As they say in South Philly, *cent'anni* — 100 years of health.

Old is unequivocal about The Bar at Ristorante Panorama (14 N. Front St., 215-922-7800) being a winning wine bar. "This isn't just great wine for Philadelphia, it's one of the best wine bars in the country." High volume, a great sommelier and 120-plus wines by the glass, including an ambitious flight program, make Panorama a must-drink.

Founders at the Park Hyatt at the Bellevue (200 S. Broad St., 215-790-2814) boasts a smart, 500-label cellar and a list of high-end, icon wines. French sommelier Jean Marc Nolant, who came onboard in early 2004, is serving a killer variety of wines by the



glass, with a list that rotates monthly and is also available in the Library bar.

Le Bar Lyonnais, downstairs at Le Bec-Fin (1523 Walnut St., 215-567-4000) pours a stellar lineup of wines by the glass, a premium pour program that delivers some of the world's best wines at an average price of \$15 a glass. "I'd rather pay \$15 a glass on a bottle that costs \$30 or \$40 than \$10 or \$15 a glass for wine that sells for that by the bottle. Le Bar is a good value for your money," said Old.

Bring your passport — your wine passport that is, to Penne (3600 Sansom St., 215-222-0200), which specializes in wines from all over Italy. Regular customers collect "stamps" to earn a free dinner, and flights of the wine variety, like a trio of wines from Venice for \$13 or three Valpolicella pours, including an Amaranone, for \$19, are a specialty.

Head sommelier Michael McCaulley is bringing the same deft touch to his list at Davio's Northern Italian Steakhouse (111 S. 17th St., 215-563-4810) as he did to for Manayunk's Jake's — lists that earned the restaurants a Wine Spectator Award of Excellence. McCaulley has started a nightly wine by the glass program, featuring wine normally sold exclusively by the bottle, including Bordeaux and Chablis, and plans to add more wines under \$50 to his list.

At Tria, (123 S. 18th St., 215-972-8742) a Center City wine/beer and cheese bar, wines are described as zippy, luscious, smooth, sociable, and funky. Pick a mood, and go for it — with most 5-ounce pours in the \$7-\$8 range, and bottles between \$35 and \$45. The variety is striking, from a Halbtrocken Riesling from Germany to Tuscan Chianti, Oregon Pinot Noir, and Nero D'Avola from Sicily.

The wine list at Verge (4101 Ridge Ave., 215-689-0050) is almost as much fun as chef Shawn Dolan's creative cuisine. Wine director Dale Belleville, who works with Moore Brothers, has created a thoughtful list of wines by the glass, including an Italian Verdicchio, a German Riesling, a French Grenache and an Italian Barbera — all \$6-\$8. The focus of the wine list is artisan produced, estate-bottled wines of high quality and good value — and Belleville delivers. His list of reds, whites and sparklers averages \$30 a bottle, and includes wonderful options that work beautifully with Dolan's food.

It seems that when it comes to a wine list, size does matter, and in most cases, smaller is best.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS KENNIG



Marnie Old is Philadelphia's premiere sommelier.