

Wine bars pour it on

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Bob Cascardo and Monica Forero, both of Pleasant Hill, decide on their wine selection at the...

The wine bar's velvet rope is the color of merlot, and Tony the bouncer checks ID after ID before guiding patrons to a glistening bar with smoked gouda, crusty bread and local olive oil. "The Bachelor" -- a dimpled and dynamic Andrew Firestone -- grape-talks on a flat-panel TV while a mustachioed bartender offers tastes of Zarzuela. He charges nothing for his easy charm and flowing wisdom.

"I'm almost done," a mother practically sings across the velvet to her young daughter -- slumped over a pork roast and toilet paper in the family's shopping cart. She, and the wine bar, are in a Livermore Safeway.

The scene epitomizes suburbia's spiking thirst for wine and wine knowledge. Luckily, there are multiple entry points. Finding the right one depends on your personal and ever-evolving tasting style.

While upscale wine bars are popping up in the East Bay, they are still few. We also taste in restaurants, but the high markup can be a drag. So it's in our well-connected wine shops, cafe-lounge hybrids and now, grocery stores, that we swirl and sip and hone our palates.

"A lot of times you don't get to try the wine before you buy it," says April Lekin of Livermore, who was shopping for salad fixings. "This way you can see if you want to put it in the cart."

That's the idea. So how is it different than BevMo's weekly wine tastings? Safeway's new lifestyle store on First Street will offer hours of free tasting every day; it also boasts 2,000 wines (that's 300 more than your standard Safeway), a temperature-controlled wine cellar storing the likes of Margaux and Latour, and appearances from Mike Grgich and Phil Wente (the mustachioed bartender).

Independents

At the Wine Steward in Pleasanton, co-managers Jim Denham and Kent Sheldon arrange wine flights around a theme, like "Sideways Again" or "Wimpy Wines" (intrigued?). You get up to five pours for \$20 or less, plus A.G. Ferrari cheeses, sliced meats and olives and Sheldon's undivided attention.

Unlike larger chain shops, like Cost Plus or Trader Joe's, a mom and pop, even one that boasts the biggest selection in the East Bay (they all do, by the way), is determined to give you customized service. They've tried every wine they sell. And their goal is to get you out of your comfort zone.

"Everyone in the East Bay knows and loves cabernet and chardonnay," Sheldon says. "But there's so much more out there."

The Wine Steward's standing-room-only Thursday and Friday night tastings got so rowdy that they scaled back the time, to 8-ish. They also taste on Saturdays, from 1 to 8 p.m.

At the Wine Mine, a new shop in Oakland's Temescal District, owner David Sharp's \$1-for-six-tastes Saturday afternoons are already gaining a following among local millennials.

"The Wine Mine is my favorite new Saturday spot," Kris N. gushes on Yelp.com.

Sharp focuses on seasonal tastings -- he's already done two rose events since opening 10 weeks ago -- and the occasional holiday theme. Like Kevin Hogan at Berkeley's Spanish Table, Sharp has an e-newsletter he fires off on Wednesdays, to prep customers' palates for Saturday.

"On Bastille Day this place looked like a San Francisco bar," says Sharp. The shop's vaulted ceilings and narrow warehouse space is housed in an old brick art deco building.

If you're new to wine or tasting, no need to be intimidated. Sharp sticks with you, steering you to the next taste or bottle by gently probing. Do you like medium-bodied reds? Are you shopping for dinner tonight? What are you cooking?

Self-serve swirling

A selfless wine steward isn't a requirement for proper tasting. Especially now that the **Enomatic** has hit the East Bay.

Walnut Creek's Artisan Wine Lounge is the only spot east of Berkeley to showcase its 32 wines by the ounce in the sleek, temperature-controlled machines. Just slip in your "debit card," press a button, and out flows luscious goodness. Taste, compare, spit or swallow. Repeat.

"This is a really good way to learn about wine," says Artisan owner Lena Chu. When people trickle in after a movie and tell her they like buttery chardonnay, Chu guides them over to a \$2 taste of Albarino. Those requesting pinot noir may be encouraged to try a splash of Rioja. At \$3 a pour, it's less of a commitment than an entire glass. And if they like it, Chu will happily sell them a bottle.

Artisan specializes in small, cult producers from California, and rotates in wines from abroad. Dying to try that Robert Biale Black Chicken Zinfandel? Chu scored a bunch of it. How about Pey-Marin's "Trois Filles" Pinot Noir? They have that, too. Because of their relationships in Napa -- sister wine bar Stave is there -- you might even be able to try a wine before it's officially released.

The raison d'être at **Berkeley's Taste**, another home to the **Enomatic**, was to create a global food and wine bar worthy of Gourmet Ghetto's standing in California's food revolution.



Wine director Greg Estes puts his strict value-buying skills to use, filling both the machine and by-the-glass list with high-quality discoveries close to his heart, such as a light, spicy Tempranillo from La Mancha, a backwater region of Spain and the home of Don Quixote.

There are also serious selections. At one point, he was offering the 1997 Chateau Y'quem, widely regarded as the world's best Sauternes, for \$17 a taste.

"You give people the chance to try these wines that they'd never otherwise try, especially at a fair price," he says.

Every weekend, he rotates half the wines out, but keeps cult bottles such as Sea Smoke Cellars Pinot Noir. So, over a period of a month, you could try nine different pinot noirs, and find your style.

Estes further challenges his customers by placing a mountain wine, Audelssa Tempest, a fine syrah from the Mayacamas Mountains, next to a top Cote Rotie from the Rhone.

"If I'm doing my job right, I'm getting the finest value candidates and making it really interesting for customers," he says.
Controlled environment

It's the same at Solano Cellars, the Albany wine shop that has steadily evolved into one of the hottest spots for tasting. Now that high-quality value wine is available from every corner of the world, it's more challenging than ever for customers to know where to start, says Peter Eastlake, who also co-owns Vintage Berkeley.

"Wine bars are the best way to learn about wine now, even more so than a class or even a tasting room," Eastlake says. Stop in and he'll teach you about Slovenian wines, or quench your summer craving for something cold and crisp and white. "If you stop in once a week for six months, you're going to learn a whole lot," he says.

Add to that promise a monthly supper club and seasonal events, like the cassoulet weekend in January, which fills the store with the scent of duck and beans, and it's easy to see why the Albany shop is an oenophile's dream. An expanded menu features pates from Cafe Rouge, salumis from Fra'Mani and inventive small plates (they lack a full kitchen) such as zucchini carpaccio with arugula-walnut pesto, and roasted peach halves with bacon and Fourme D'Ambert.

"Our concept is to be a place for people to taste the stuff that we're buying for the store, with a complementary nosh to wash it down with," Eastlake says. "When you go to a wine bar in Florence, it's the same thing: little wine stores with a lot of familiar faces."

Leave it to California to produce the same effect in a neighborhood Safeway. Gina Froehlich of Livermore has been stopping by every day since the supermarket's wine bar opened. On this particular day, she's having Phil Wentz sign a bottle of his Murrieta's Well Zarzuela as a gift to her son.

Stacey Kunzler is particularly tickled that the same pour costs \$5 at the winery's tasting room just down the road. Not a bad way to finish an early dinner at Applebee's, Kunzler muses while swirling.

And to think, she just popped in for cookies and cherry limeade.

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Where to sip, swirl

□ Artisan Wine Lounge: Temperature-controlled Enomatic machine houses 32 wines from small producers in the Napa Valley. Menu features lunch, small plates and dessert. Check Web site for special events. 1633 Bonanza St., Walnut Creek. 925-280-1633. <http://www.artisanwl.com>.

□ Va De Vi Wine Bar: The bistro's wine list features three-ounce pours, six-ounce glasses and whimsically themed red or white wine flights from around the world. 1511 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Walnut Creek. 925-979-0100. <http://www.va-de-vi-bistro.com>.

□ Taste: Street-side bar in Gourmet Ghetto's Epicurious Garden features Enomatic machine with 32 high-value wines from around the world. Menu features global tapas and another 15 wines by the glass. 1513 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. 510-540-7800. <http://www.tasteberkeley.com>.

□ Wine Thieves: The value-g geared wine shop has popular Friday happy-hour tastings and other events for wine club members. Check Web site for schedule. 3401 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette. 925-299-9070. 5443 Clayton Road, Clayton. 925-672-4003. <http://www.winethieves.com>.

□ Solano Cellars: Vintage Berkeley's co-owners have expanded the menu at their Albany store's wine bar with cheeses from Tomales Bay Foods and charcuterie from The Fatted Calf. Bar is open 4-9 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, noon-9 p.m. Saturdays and noon-6 p.m. Sundays. 1580 Solano Ave., Albany. 510-525-9463. <http://www.solanocellars.com>.

□ The Wine Steward: A Pleasanton wine shop with five themed flights (\$15-\$20) served Thursdays-Saturdays with snacks from A.G. Ferrari Foods. Check Web site for schedule. 641 Main St., Pleasanton. 925-600-9463. <http://www.thewinesteward.com>.

□ Wine Mine: This new warehouse-style wine shop offers a \$1 Saturday afternoon tasting that's all the rage among Temescal district hipsters. Olive oil and chocolate tastings with local producers. 5427 Telegraph Ave., Oakland. 510-547-9463. <http://www.winemineco.com>.

□ Safeway: The supermarket's flagship lifestyle store offers free daily tastings of featured wines and visits from vintners. Check with the store for current schedule. 4495 First St., Livermore. 925-455-2520.

Coming soon: 100 by the glass

Walnut Creek wine drinkers will rejoice when Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar opens Aug. 30. National wine director Marian Jansen op de Haar's highly acclaimed wine program features 60 wines by the glass. A local wine manager will add another 40 with a regional focus. Customer friendly in every way, the wines -- a mix of classics, burgeoning regional varietals and boutique cult favorites -- are listed by increasing intensity. Six flights served in mini-carafes make for easy sharing and comparing. Upon request, the wines can be served blind, with tasting notes -- instant wine class! Suggested food and wine pairings round out the experience. 1685 Mt. Diablo Blvd. <http://www.flemingssteakhouse.com>.