

Food & Wine

Decanter

Wine by the glass? ...

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...A growing number of exacting restaurants are turning to fancy new technology to combat the oxidation problem.

One such establishment is Reds Bistro & Wine Bar in Toronto's financial district. Already known for one of the largest by-the-glass selections in the country (typically between 70 and 80), Reds several weeks ago added eight more superpremium selections, all dispensed by a machine called an Enomatic wine serving system. Or, as its Canadian distributor in Montreal, Stéphane Fournier, calls it, an "electronic wine bar."

Invented in Italy in 2002 by two Tuscan entrepreneurs, it is designed to guard against the slightest degree of spoilage. The system works by automatically filling the airspace above the fluid in the bottle with a blanket of inert gas (argon or nitrogen, depending on local availability). Enomatic boasts it will keep wines like new for more than three weeks.

Installed in about 5,000 locations around the world, including almost 100 in Canada, the system works with a prepaid electronic debit card that the customer typically buys at the cashier, inserting it into the machine and selecting one-, two- or five-ounce pours. Because of killjoy Ontario restrictions against self-service, at Reds the card is duly guarded by the bartender, who does the swiping for you.



"It's really exciting and it's a great conversation piece," Taylor Thompson, the sommelier at Reds, told me over a fresh pour of Etude pinot noir from California. The system was not entirely new to me; I had put an Enomatic through its paces last year at the wine

superstore Lavinia in Paris. Fun isn't the word; it was like a slot machine for hedonists, with a constant payout of little sips of wine that you might never risk buying by the bottle.

The Reds system is on loan from Foster's Wine Estates Canada, which saw an opportunity to promote its luxury wines to people afraid to take a chance on a full bottle. The Enomatic wines on offer at Reds include the rare Penfolds Grange Shiraz 2000 (\$100 for a five-ounce glass), Beringer Howell Mountain Merlot 2000 (\$65 a glass) and Château St. Jean Cinq Cépages 2001 (\$75 a glass).

Mr. Thompson says more than a few patrons have opted for one-ounce pours (at \$23 in the case of Grange) as a way to test drive wines they had been considering by the bottle. "People also can try wines that they may be aging in their own cellar," he said.



Ontario restrictions notwithstanding, Enomatic systems, ranging from \$4,000 for a bare-bones four-bottle unit to \$18,000 for a dual-temperature eight-bottle model, have been set up in select stores in most provinces from Newfoundland to British Columbia, including eight in Quebec. There is no danger of customers getting blotto, Mr. Fournier says. "It's all software driven. We can lock a card by the amount of millilitres it serves a person per hour. It's even a better lock than a barman."

The system, encased in handsome stainless steel and glass, is also finding its way into private homes. Mr. Fournier says several collectors in Canada have bought Enomatics as a new way to enjoy expensive wines gathering dust in their cellars. One customer in Montreal installed an eight-bottle system in his living room.

"It's always a question of, 'When am I going to open that special bottle?' " he said. "With this machine, now you have a month to discover it." ...