

Bin vivant: an invitation to play with your food and wine

By Providence Cicero
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Raise your hand if you know the name of the restaurant in the Woodmark Hotel at Carillon Point. For years it was called Waters, operating quietly under a series of chefs. Over the summer it became bin vivant, and it's already making a big enough splash to leave obscurity behind for good.

There are several reasons. One is Enomatic, a wine-storage system that uses argon gas to keep dozens of wines fresh for up to 30 days after they are opened. Another is Dawn Smith, coaxed away from the Canlis wine team to serve as bin vivant's sommelier and wine manager. A third is Chef Lisa Nakamura.

Nakamura's considerable culinary skills, last displayed at the short-lived Seattle restaurant Qube, are reason enough to seek out bin vivant — and seek you must, descending to the hotel's lower level and down a corridor of banquet rooms, often past a gauntlet of giddy wedding guests, before arriving at the restaurant's bronzed glass doors.



It may lack street presence, but its proximity to Lake Washington is a huge asset. French doors open to a generous heated patio, a prime spot for watching the sun dissolve beyond the Seattle skyline. Inside, racks of wine bottles rise to arched ceilings; sofas and a fireplace outfit the snug lounge. The design consciously evokes a wine cellar, but one with elegant appointments and spalike serenity.

Wine drives the concept, as the pun in the name suggests. (Bins are shelves with compartments for storing bottles in a wine cellar.) Smith compiled an eclectic, at times esoteric, roster of wines that are poured in one, three or six-ounce measures. She assigned each to a descriptive flavor category: Verdant, Fruit & Cream; Smoke & Spice, etc. Then she and Nakamura identified food flavors that would complement each category. Finally Nakamura wrote the menu, keying each dish to its designated wine category. The results of their collaboration appear side by side on the menu, with more choices on a separate wine list.



If you are the sort of diner who first decides what to drink, then looks for something to eat with it, this is your apotheosis. Others could feel conflicted, even perplexed, by the many ways to mix and match. Will wine neophytes feel reluctant to deviate from the program? Will rebels feel compelled to?

Must you sip something "Verdant" with Prawns and 'Shrooms? No, but Spain's Martinsancho verdejo brilliantly underscored the spicy, floral notes in the avocado sauce, a silky coulis,

thinned with orange blossom water. The sauce, in turn, enhanced both the prawns and "shrooms," a mince of mushrooms and shrimp fashioned into savory balls similar to quenelles that taste remarkably like pork.

Real pork called for a "Not Quite Sweet" wine. Alsatian pinot gris from Lucien Albrecht was undaunted by the pungent Asian flavors of Pig-in-a-Blanket, spring rolls wrapping slivers of char siu pork and basil, served with hoisin and sambal-spiked carrot slaw.

If you don't care for rosés, must you drink a "Blushing Beauty" with Parisian Pizza? Of course not, but a Walla Walla rosé might be just the thing with the pizza's thick caramelized onion topping, somewhat sparsely trimmed with Niçoise olives and white anchovies.

Should a "Formidable Red" accompany charcuterie? Not necessarily, but something big, say Château La Fleur Saint-Emilion, would be an excellent partner for this terrific ensemble of Creminelli cured meats and variously sharp and fruity mustards (orange, grape and grainy). The array included prosciutto, salami and two dry sausages — one made with Barolo wine, the other with porcini and Parmesan.



That same French Bordeaux played very well against Moroccan Style Lamb, too. Tucked into a miniature fry basket are tiny pita pockets just the right size to hold one of three, juicy, spice-packed lamb burgers and their cooling condiments: cucumber-yogurt and fresh tomato-onion salsa.

Lamb shank ragout tossed with Zia Lisa's Papardelle demands something with "Smoke and Spice." The meat was a little too dry and chewy, but the syrah reduction coating the wide noodles had a sweet intensity, nicely punctuated by peppery arugula and pickled, spiced grapes.

I was even more impressed with roast chicken and grilled wild salmon, which, like the pasta, are among "bigger plates." Pancetta and brown mushrooms bolstered the chicken's lovely Riesling-based cream sauce. Morels, shiitakes and sliced leeks contributed to a robust brown sauce that was as absolutely right for the rich fish as a "Drop Red Gorgeous" pinot noir would be.

So, what if you think "Effervescent" goes with everything? It's not against the rules to sip Krug Grand Cuvee with scallops or Veuve Clicquot Brut Rosé with sautéed gnocchi. The scallops' gorgeous golden, cognac-seared crust was speckled with vanilla; two pureés became a convergence zone of tart apricot and bitter spinach. The gnocchi were a little too soft but happily nested among wild mushrooms and shaved black truffle.

Customers can even build their own tasting menus with or without wine pairings. Soon they'll be able to do this electronically, on a tablet that will even store their previous degustations. Cheese is the logical way to end a meal in such a wine-focused milieu. Of the three orchid-embellished plates, geared to mesh with sweet, white or red wines, only the Tallegio, Roquefort and Muenster trio showed real distinction.

My favorite finale was the "21 Club," a sundae for grown-ups made with Olympic Mountain vanilla ice cream, shaved chocolate, roasted peanuts and chunks of peanut brittle. The "sauce" comes on the side: a glass of sweet, nutty, Pedro Jimenez sherry meant to be poured over top.

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