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DRINK


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Bar None

Interactive tasting — digital menus and no bartender — makes for good fun at Clo Wine Bar

Picture the ultimate wine tasting room: Perhaps it's a musty, dank, candlelit cave piled high with French oak barrels where aged nectars of fine grapes are sipped from pure crystal? Maybe, if you're lucky enough to visit the great wineries of France or Napa Valley.

But in New York City, the place to sample more than 100 boutique, cult, and rare wines from around the world — and meet other wine lovers without being intimidated by snooty oenophiles — is the Clo Wine Bar + Shop, which has no bar, no bartenders, and no dark grotto ambience. Just the opposite, in fact.

Clo (clowines.com, 212.823.9898) is more like a lively party thrown nightly by a high-tech vintner in his sleek, minimalist private home that just happens to overlook Central Park. Located on the fourth floor of the Time Warner Center, Clo is furnished only with a 30-foot-long, two-foot-wide communal table and 32 Italian-designed black stools. That's a bold move when the guests are essentially strangers, but before long they've broken the ice and most are chatting like old friends. At least two certified sommeliers are on duty to demystify the varietals. In the meantime, guests walk around and get acquainted, and what's in their glass is the conversation starter.

The secret to Clo's success is its interactivity, and that doesn't just refer to the socializing, sipping, and sharing of wines. The communal table has 10 touch screens, or “viewing stations,” embedded in the white acrylic top. Electronic wine lists are displayed by three projectors. Touch the screen for a particular wine and you can read tasting notes on the flavor, the region, and the appellation written for Clo by a master sommelier, plus the price. Make a selection, and the Enomatic dispensing machine pours four ounces into a fine Riedel glass. Prices range from \$7 for a dry white from Argentina to near \$100.

The idea man behind Clo is 40-year-old Andrew Bradbury, a high-energy, high-technology guy and a candidate for a master sommelier designation — like a Steve Jobs of wine. Before moving to Manhattan, he was wine director of Charlie Palmer's hip Aureole in Las Vegas.

At Clo, Bradbury's imagination has run wild, albeit strategically. The tasting area is surrounded by eight-foot-high industrial steel walls that don't reach the ceiling. The exterior sides serve as eye-catching showcases for glasses, decanters, wine buckets, accessories, and vitacultural memorabilia from around the globe, all for sale. And Bradbury has thoughtfully eliminated a necessary annoyance — the bill. You can buy a debit or credit version of a Clo Tasting Card, which activates the wine dispensing machine and tallies your tastings.

Wine is supposed to be enjoyed with food, so Clo serves fine cheeses at \$15 for a plate of three and \$20 for a selection of five. The charcuterie list is small but exotic and includes a mortadella laced with pistachios, a hot *coppa* (think prosciutto), and *sopressata*, a sweet and salty cured pork, at \$6 apiece. A duck mousse pâté with black truffles is \$9. Bradbury purposely keeps a tight rein on his menu. “We’re surrounded on this floor by a couple of the top restaurants in the country — Masa and Thomas Keller’s Per Se. In fact, we send them customers.”

Bradbury, a Seattle native, says he created Clo to show the younger, style-conscious customer that wine is something that shouldn’t be scary. “After all,” he says, “it’s just grape juice.”

— *Chris Barnett*

The Wine Shop

This month Continental Sommelier David Gordon, who lends his award-winning expertise to New York’s Tribeca Grill and other restaurants, recommends three great values.

Lioco Chardonnay, Sonoma 2007, \$19.99

Lioco is a partnership between co-founder Matt Licklider and Spago Wine Director Kevin O’Connor. They blend this flavorful chardonnay from several vineyard sources in Sonoma. Unlike most California chardonnays, it doesn’t see any oak aging. Ripe with refreshing citrus flavors, this is a fine pairing with lighter seafood preparations.

Pelaque Côtes du Rhône, France 2007, \$12.99

This small producer in the southern Rhône is a reliable choice for delicious, classic Côtes du Rhône. A blend of mostly Grenache and Syrah, it has leather and spice tones along with ripe kirsch and plum flavors. 2007 is a fantastic vintage in the Rhône Valley.

Montebaco Ribera del Duero Crianza, Spain 2005, \$21.99

Made from 100 percent Tempranillo, this medium-bodied, toasty wine comes from vineyards at 2,600 feet above sea level. Blackberry, licorice, and tar aromas and flavors make this an alluring wine to drink now, but it will continue to improve for three to five years. — *D.G.*



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