

Mina's latest, RN74, a wine bar with fine food

Jon Bonné, Chronicle Wine Editor

Thursday, April 16, 2009

Raj Parr had wanted to open a wine bar since his days as a novice sommelier at Rubicon. In 1997, at the height of dot-com glories, he marveled as savvy barely 21s in T-shirts ordered bottles of Chateau Latour. "There was no pretense about it," Parr recalls.



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

But when you're the wine director for four-star chef Michael Mina, the wine bar concept might get some extra polish. Which helps explain why Mina and Parr's new project, RN74, is set to premiere next week as San Francisco's most high-profile restaurant in months, an ambitious launch into an ebbing economy. Named for the highway that runs up the spine of Burgundy's Cote d'Or, it reflects Parr's intent to evoke a Burgundian mix of high-end gastronomy and farmhouse humility.

"I think that fine wine and fine food is typically connected to formality," Parr says. "That is a habit we want to break."

A laid-back approach and more affordable prices than some might expect from a Mina project are the draws. But wine will be the focus at RN74 in a way that few Bay Area restaurants have ever attempted. The expansive wine list - 81 pages as of this week - is unmatched in the city; Bacar, Spruce and the now-closed Rubicon might have come closest.

Burgundies, which dominate the selections, include numerous vintages of Domaine de la Romanee-Conti and Henri Jayer's unattainable Cros Parantoux. From Bordeaux come verticals of Chateaux Latour and Lafite-Rothschild; the Lafite goes back to 1870. There's German Riesling, Chateauneuf du Pape, rare old bottles from Napa (1958 Inglenook, anyone?). RN74 has a wine benefactor in Wilf Jaeger, one of California's top wine collectors, who invested in the project and made the 30,000 bottles in his cellars available.

With a \$4.5 million budget, RN74 (301 Mission St., in the Millennium Tower) marks several milestones for Mina. Though he operates restaurants throughout the world, this is his first San Francisco project beyond his namesake in the Westin St. Francis. And Mina himself will remain in the background. Though he typically creates menus for each new restaurant, this time he let executive chef Jason Berthold take charge after he evaluated Berthold's cooking at several of his other properties.

"He was the missing piece for Raj and me," Mina says. "We wanted somebody who was really wine savvy but had amazing cooking skills."

Berthold was a sous chef at the French Laundry and helped open Per Se in New York, where he worked with Chris L'Hommedieu, who would become one of Mina's top lieutenants. He and Parr are both clear that wine will be the primary focus. Indeed, both men make wines under the Courier and Parr Selections labels, respectively, that will be served at RN74.

Food comes in smaller portions that top out at \$17 with flavors tweaked to showcase the wine (mushrooms are a frequent element).

The menu includes such items as Beau Soleil oysters with a potato puree and smoked paprika (\$17) and veal sweetbreads with rhubarb and sylvetta arugula (\$17). An additional bar menu includes items like maitake mushroom tempura (\$10) and sea urchin carbonara (\$14), plus homages to bar food like crispy duck wings with Espelette pepper (\$11).

So, really, it won't be like any wine bar you've ever seen. For one, much of the space is occupied by a 75-seat restaurant complete with vaulted overhead wood arches, dominated by two large train boards: one will feature about 75 wines on a standard "market" list; a second looming over the far end of the room - quite literally an electronic train board from Italy - will flash last-bottle deals. Gimmicky, perhaps, but a handy bit of chaos to interject into a wine lover's evening.

A steel-shelved cellar holds 7,000 bottles (more are stored off-site) and a \$40,000 Enomatic machine keeps 32 wines fresh using inert argon gas; RN74 will serve 50 by the glass or 2.5-ounce taste.



Parr and Jaeger agreed their goal was to celebrate wine in a setting that wasn't stuffy - one that would accommodate drinkers with all sizes of wallets. So no tablecloths. Staff will wear jeans. Diners receive the same Riedel glasses and decanters whether they've ordered a \$60 bottle of 2006 Regis Bouvier Marsannay or a \$8,000 1959 Musigny from Georges Roumier. Parr is planning late-night tastings near the 40-seat bar area.

"In some ways the message that we are sending is that even great wines need not be intimidating," Jaeger wrote in an e-mail. "They are intended to be enjoyed, not revered."

Two weeks before opening, the ground-floor space is a blur of activity. Contractors install elongated orange light fixtures, an AvroKo trademark. Servers gather around Patric Yumul, Mina's vice president of operations, who gives a PowerPoint presentation on the finer points of service.

Parr offers the staff daily wine lectures, complete with quizzes that would put many a sommelier to shame: Name three great producers in Meursault. What's the grape in Moulin a Vent?

With a kitchen that includes more than 24 cooks and about 30 staff members on the restaurant floor, RN74 might seem ambitious at a time when modesty is the order of the day, but Parr says the only significant tweak was not to serve some expensive wines by the glass. Otherwise, his wine haven is chugging forward toward its debut.

"Usually wine bars have been an afterthought," Parr says. "I've been thinking of this for 8, 9 years. So it's definitely not an afterthought."

RN74 opens Friday, April 24.

Sunday in Food & Wine: The 10 cocktail recipes every home bartender should know.

E-mail Jon Bonné at jbonne@sfchronicle.com.