

COVER STORY

EXPLORING S.F.'S HOTTEST WINE BARS by Maria Piccininni

TOAST OF THE TOWN

WHEN I MOVED TO SAN FRANCISCO FIVE YEARS AGO, I WAS JUST ON THE CUSP OF APPRECIATING

fine wine. I had graduated from post-college White Zinfandel, onto tame Merlots, until finally, an appreciation for bold Cabernet emerged. San Francisco is the perfect place to ignite your untapped wine passions, or simply refine your tastes as you branch out into different varietals and food pairings.

I recently toured some of the city's hot spots to get the vibe on the wine bar scene. Were they snobby, pretentious, and too hip for their own good? Or could this gal find a slice of wine country joie de vivre right here in the city? A place to experience the soulful "wine lovers" culture, which is more than a beverage – it's lively conversation, relaxation, and appreciation for life's little joys. Tedious research? Hardly. But with the most objective eye I can muster, here's just a sampling of some of the city's wine delights located east of Van Ness and north of 22nd Street. The diverse options are sure to suit any mood and any level of wine appreciation.

ENOTECA VIANSA

Enoteca Viansa, a casual Italian wine bar experience, is a unique brand extension for Sonoma's Viansa Winery and Marketplace. Owners San and Vicky Sebastiani wanted to bring the winery experience close to cityfolk on a daily basis. This unique concept of a "tasting room away from home" works extremely well. Enoteca offers over 30 different wines that will please newbies and experts alike. You can buy small and large samples, as well as bottles – even purchase bottles to go.

The modern, minimalist lounge boasts a long white marble bar, as well as sleek leather couches and chairs throughout, lit by soft votives. The room's centerpiece is a large framed sepia-toned photo of the winery. Brown, black, and white accents

abound, and simple shelves hold bottles and bottles as far as the eye can see.

A Financial District work crowd can be found during the week, and an energetic, yet subdued vibe fills the place on weekends. Young professionals mix easily with an older crowd – all tied together for their love of good wine and good company. You can also purchase nibbles such as fine cheeses, chutneys, and olives and nuts to complement your tastings.

Manager Jeff Zamora loves to talk wine, and has a wealth of knowledge in picking out good vintages depending on your tastes. An extremely friendly wait staff is eager to walk intimidated newbies through wine selections, and easily locate unique, bold samples for those master sommeliers.

The goal of Enoteca and Viansa winery at large, according to Zamora, is to grow a

Cal-Italia heritage fruit with a different image from bulk wines, yet with accessibility for those just embarking on their wine education. 334 Grant (at Bush), 391-0207. Monday–Thursday, Noon to 9:00pm; Friday and Saturday, Noon to 11:00pm; Sunday, Noon to 8:00pm.

VINO VENUE

For a unique educational journey, VinoVenue is a hit. Billed as "The Place to Taste," this is also a perfect place to take out of town guests, as well as sample over 100 different wines from the United States, France, Italy, Spain, South Africa, even Lebanon. The open yet cold main room holds 11 tasting stations: Rhone varietals, Bordeaux, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Italian varietals, Adventures, lighter whites, and fuller whites. A small curtained section to the left of the bar holds luxury whites and reds as well.

Guests buy a pre-paid ATM-like tasting card and then take their wine



Pier 23 Café (left). "See or be seen" at Bubble Lounge (right).



Vineyards. The gallery focuses on wines from the emerging Diablo Grande region, a spot located between the hills of the San Joaquin Valley and Santa Clara Valley. Try this spot for some amazing up and coming wines and be the first to tell your friends. 669 Mission (near 3rd), 543-4343. Open seven days a week, 11:00am to 6:00pm, or by appointment.

LONDON WINE BAR

With an inventory of over 13,000 bottles, this Financial District lunch and after work destination is a great affordable spot to savor and sip. The classic British pub atmosphere provides an attitude-free environment for casual folks. While heavily influenced by small California producers, they also have a nice selection of French and Australian wines. Serving approximately four dozen choices of wine, champagne, and sparkling wine, "America's First Wine Bar," as they call themselves, also offers ports, sherries, and beers on tap in case you bring a mixed crowd. Feel free to nosh on small plates from 2:30 to 9:00pm or catch a full lunch at scheduled hours. 415 Sansome (at Pacific), 788-4811. Monday–Friday, 11:30am to 9:00pm; Lunch served from 11:30am to 2:30pm.

BUBBLE LOUNGE

Discover and enjoy over 300 champagnes and sparkling wines in this swanky, dimly lit social haven. They also have two full bars and light nibbles. Lounge on plush couches and chairs as you chat, mingle, and enjoy the young professional "see or be seen" crowd. 714 Montgomery (at Washington and Jackson), 434-4204. Mondays, 5:30pm to 1:00am; Tuesday–Friday, 5:30pm to 2:00am; Saturday, 6:30pm to 2:00am; Closed Sundays. ■

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Pour and explore for yourself at VinoVenue.

glasses to various stations. Tasting prices range from about \$1.50 to \$8.00 per bottle. You simply find your selection, press a button, and a measured sample amount (1.5 oz.) is dispensed in your glass. This approach works well for those who want to learn and taste but not feel intimidated by hovering wine experts.

Every sample wine is available for bottle purchase. While it's a cross between a wine bar and a retail outlet/classroom, it's also a novel "destination activity," much like visiting an art gallery. The eclectic crowd mills around the various tasting stations rather than merely sitting and sipping. But for those people who want to "try before they buy," this is the right spot to access lots of quality – and unique – wines at all price points.

Twenty dollars between two people gets you a well-rounded sampling throughout the store – perfect for those who want to try before they buy. VinoVenue's Luis Moya says that the lounge is expanding their collections in the next few months to wines you can't find anywhere else – unique vintages made in places one would never suspect, like Idaho or Michigan, as well as from around the world. 686 Mission (at 3rd), 341-1930. Monday–Thursday, Noon to 9:00pm; Friday and Saturday, Noon to 10:00pm; Sunday, 2:00 to 6pm.

1550 HYDE CAFÉ AND WINE BAR

This combo wine bar/restaurant boasts a bare bones vibe for those

seeking an extensive wine list but a fantastic full dinner. More bistro than bar, I thoroughly enjoyed the dizzying selection of wines featured in conjunction with some tasty rustic dishes. The menu alters weekly while a featured wine flight changes every two weeks. Our lucky night tempted us with a Malbec flight that was a fantastic deal – three healthy glasses for only \$12.

The staff seems knowledgeable for any of you inclined to satisfy your adventurous wine streak. This place was packed on a Saturday night, but the décor would seem a bit cold had the place not been full. They could do with a warm shade of paint, but the glow of the small bar as well as the post-flight rosy cheeks we developed help make this a more intimate spot. And the quaint Russian Hill location just cannot be beat for instilling a calm romance. 1550 Hyde (at Pacific), 775-1550. Sunday, 5:30pm to 9:30pm; Monday–Thursday, 6:00 to 10:00pm; Friday and Saturday, 6:00 to 10:30pm.

THE DIABLO GRANDE WINE GALLERY

An upscale ranch-style ambience greets you upon walking into another unique wine tasting experience in SoMA. Enjoy an after-work happy hour in this honey-tones hideaway, complete with light fare as well as a variety of seminars on fine food and wine. Spacious while at the same time cozy, this spot boasts 100 percent estate bottled wines from Diablo Grande and Isom Ranch