

WINE BAR CATERS TO A SOPHISTICATED CRÚ
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Some days ago, I attended a spectacular wedding, an intimate gathering of two dozen people overlooking the ocean at Big Sur. "There I saw the cloud-clot, gust by gust, / Form, and the lightning bite, and the roan mane unloosen": James Merrill's "The Mad Scene" was part of the ceremony and perhaps more beautiful even than the scenery. The groom, one of my dearest friends in Austin, is someone I should have known in Dallas. We went to high school together there. But we didn't meet till my second night as an Austinite. Having missed each other in one city, we became friends in the next.

The Dallas-based wine bar Crú recently has expanded into Austin's spiffy new Second Street District (which actually reminds me of the chichi/funky Knox-Cole-y parts of Dallas). Jo's second-iteration coffeehouse stands on one side, and Design Within Reach is a few doors down on the other. Crú itself is as shiny as its neighborhood, with a waitstaff dressed in black, seating for 24 on the patio, a small private room for tastings and parties, three-glass wine flights (\$11-\$20, 2-ounce pours each) presented on sleek steel carriers. Wine is poured up to a delicately etched line not far below the carefully etched "C" on each glass — for a perfect six-ounce pour every time, as the manager tells me.

Any wine bar worth its grapes is going to offer a number of varietals from a range of regions. Crú offers about 40 wines by the glass (\$7-\$24), from Champagne to syrah and from France to Australia, and about 175 by the bottle (they plan to offer about 300 by the bottle at the end of September). Some are inexpensive, but Crú also has a number of nicer bottles (I'm partial to Far Niente myself) if you're feeling flush. Most important, the wine list is dynamic — on each of my three visits, I stuck with California zinfandels and each time my options changed. Patrons can pair the wine with a menu that includes pizza, tenderloin and flights of cheese (12 types).

Though Crú talks about being a place to "explore" wine (according to its Web site), it struck me as a better place to show off. The staff is knowledgeable (a good friend of mine who works there loves to talk about wine) and the menu is approachable. But the sleek atmosphere, with plush, high-back love seats, low tables with menus folded into the napkins and heavy wood bins of wine, strikes me as an appropriate place to bring a date or business contact, and casually mention how hot Spanish wines are or why Amador County, Calif., grapes produce such structured zinfandels (you know, the things you learn by hanging out at Wiggy's or in Napa or eavesdropping on another table).

At the Big Sur wedding, another friend read one of Pablo Neruda's sonnets: "and thanks to your love, darkly in my body / lives the dense fragrance that rises from the earth." I love the sonnet and it, like the Merrill poem, has haunted me since I got home. But this one also reminds me of what I love in wine: dense fragrances, darkly in the body. An aside: Another Dallas transplant has moved into the Second Street District as well: Cantina Laredo. When I worked at Cantina on Dallas' Walnut Hill Lane in high school and through college, it was a family-style Mexican restaurant with "Big Mama"

margaritas, good food for a good price and an utterly unpretentious staff. It felt like Polvo's, actually. These days, Consolidated Restaurant Operations sells Cantina Laredo franchises offering upscale, gourmet Mexican food. Sitting at the bar on my lone trip to Austin's Cantina, I wasn't knocked out by the service, and the upscale atmosphere was still a little discomfiting. But the fajitas tasted nearly the same, and the rocks margarita was solid.

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