

AT THESE RESTAURANTS, BARS AND SHOPS, THE PERFECT PAIR FOR THE EVENING STARTS WITH VINO

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One thing I've learned as XL's "Bargirl" columnist: This city is packed with people who know their wines. But where, if you are not out sampling the grape on a regular basis, can you pin down those experts?

First: Dine out. To start your education, we chose five restaurants with extensive wine lists, so that you can pair sumptuous food with your "unctuous" wines (seriously, the Castle Hill/Mirabelle sommelier thusly described a wine to my eternal pleasure). Scads more eateries specialize in wines, so we drummed up a short list of others as well.

Second step: Drop by a bar for a glass. Wine bars aren't as popular here as pubs, but if you and your crew just want some bubbly or a chewy zin on a Wednesday evening, we've got some thoughts for where you might go.

Finally, if you want to invite friends over to your house for some comfy sipping, we've got a few suggestions for well-stocked places — with staff on the ready to help you navigate the wine aisles — to find exactly the right bottle.

Oh, and if we didn't mention your No. 1 vino stop, pop a line to mbarnes@statesman.com and we'll post your suggestion on Austin360.com.

Chin chin.

Restaurants

Huisache Grill and Wine Bar

303 W. San Antonio St., New Braunfels.

(830) 620-9001

The first time I went to Huisache, it was to meet my boyfriend's grandmother — and there was no way I was drinking anything but water. The next time, I availed myself of the lovely relaxed atmosphere, the crackle of a hearth fire, artisanal crackers, apples and cheese, and some grilled spinach soaked in butter. And of course, wine. Wine Spectator gave Huisache a 2006 Award of Excellence and its list is deep and constantly changing. From the \$98 bottle of Quintessa cabernet that I craved to the \$24 bottle of Renwood zinfandel that we actually drank; from the 187 milliliter, \$12 mini-bottles of Pommery POP Champagne to the German and Italian pinot grigios, this 150-label wine list impressed — a perfect ending to a day spent at Gruene Hall.

Castle Hill

1101 W. Fifth St. 476-0728

One thing that's amazing about a restaurant with a sommelier who uses words like 'unctuous' in his wine descriptions is that, even if an individual member of the staff seems only moderately interested in helping you choose a wine to pair with your food, it's hard to go wrong because so many of the wine choices are spectacular. The Castle Hill folks

also own Mirabelle and they're into wines — the list changes almost weekly, with 36 available by the glass and 87 by the bottle at the moment. The wine descriptions are among the most amusing I've seen. My trout was great, my friend's gumbo was great, the zinfandel port we tried for dessert was great fun — an excellent place altogether.

Ruth's Chris Steak House
107 W. Sixth St. 477-7884

Wine Spectator loves this place (it's won awards of excellence from 2000 to the present), and I have to admit, I understand. It's posh — drop by and ask for a table and they'll ask for your name so that your waiter can address you by it all night — and the wine selections are thoughtful. I tried a \$14 glass of big, structured Stonestreet cabernet with my scrumptious corn-fed USDA huge filet at the suggestion of my waiter, who first ascertained my likings before offering suggestions. Ruth's Chris carries 200 labels and offers 60 wines by the glass.

Asti Trattoria
408 E. 43rd St. 451-1218

All meals should start with a glass of prosecco. Our very knowledgeable and thoughtful server suggested a glass of La Villa bubbly before our dinner and it was divine. A little chicken, a little pork and a split of Bandol Château Pradeaux (on special for \$35 and it was pretty good) later, we were happy campers, largely because of the intimate, romantic atmosphere. Asti radiates that lovely upscale neighborhood bistro feel. We liked the food, we liked the Bandol; we loved the prosecco, the warmth of the interior and our waiter's service and knowledge.

Vin Bistro
160 W. 38th St. 377-5252

This is my favorite place to eat a good meal with a lovely bottle of wine, especially on Monday nights, when all bottles are half off (there are about 135 to choose from, and 67 available by the glass). My boyfriend and I stopped in on a recent Monday; he had the best sea bass of his life, I had some very good salmon, and we again began the meal with a little Mumm bubbly (a habit now, post-Asti) and finished with a \$50-reduced-to-\$25 bottle of white (Scagliola) that our knowledgeable server suggested as working with both our dishes. Vin was unusually quiet that Monday, so we could overhear the bits of French and German being spoken at tables around us.

Other restaurants to try:

Fleming's, Driskill Grill, Four Seasons Cafe, Mirabelle, Sullivan's, Truluck's, Fino, Hudson's on the Bend, Siena, Aquarelle, Zoot.

Wine bars

Wink
1014 N. Lamar Blvd. 482-8868

Wink is the top of the heap. The only reason it's not included in the restaurant section — because it easily could be — is because its wine bar is so good and it seemed unfair to list Wink in two categories. The atmosphere is at once playful and decadent — upscale

neighborhood bistro meets ironic, pipe-smoking '60s hepster who's secretly a romantic. Yum! The staff knows wine like Einstein knows physics — I've never had a bad suggestion or even a mediocre wine there: about 50 available by the glass. The food is extraordinary — and appetizers are half-price during happy hour. Just go. And then go again.

Crú 2nd Street

235 W. Second St., 472-9463

Crú's got some fancy-schmancy edges — what I like to think of as Dallas sheen. And at the same time, it has a terrific, constantly evolving wine list and the service has always been stellar. Crú offers about 40 wines by the glass (\$7-\$28), from Champagne to syrah and from France to Australia, and about 300 by the bottle. You can try out several wines by ordering one of 13 flights. Or, if you're feeling flush try a bottle of Melbury Bond for \$375 or Opus One for \$265. Patrons can pair the wine with a menu that includes pizza, tenderloin and flights of cheese.

Vinosity

3500 Jefferson St. 420-9111

Open since April, this wine shop/watering hole feels like a 'Friends' coffeehouse for wine lovers. The walls are lined with bottles, the staff is friendly and the bottles thoughtfully selected (they specialize in "small production, hard to find wines"). Four whites and four reds are often available for drinking, though you can open any bottle for a slight fee. Vinosity's chef offer foods from pâté to ratatouille — the menu changes regularly. Saturdays are wine tastings days; there are a half-dozen tables, the small bar up front, bright lights, beer in the refrigerator cases and sundry coffees brewing.

Cork & Co.

308 Congress Ave. 474-2675

This combination wine shop/wine bar on Congress Avenue is exceedingly fun. Its warm staff offers innumerable varieties of wine by the glass, and then offers the bottle as well (120 labels to choose from, all also available by the glass). A recent stop coincided with a wine class, where lots of young well-dressed folks learned about grapes and taste; we nibbled at goat cheese and crackers nearby, while each sipping on one of the \$5-a-glass happy-hour wines — or trying one of the 22 wine flights.

Malaga

208 W. Fourth St. 236-8020

Smack dab in the middle of the Warehouse District, Malaga is a wine and tapas bar. There's a full bar, but with 50 wines by the glass (many priced at \$6 and \$7) and 300 wines available by the bottle (for a total of 350 labels), wine tends to be the more interesting choice. Tapas involve fabulous words such as 'manchego' and 'tortilla,' and selected tapas can be paired with selected wines for only \$6 during happy hour, 5 to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

Wine stores

Grape Vine Market

7938 Great Northern Blvd. 323-5900

In a word: Easy. My whole mid-afternoon trip to buy wine was no more than 20 minutes, at least seven of which I spent distracted by all the groceries and Northern California-esque wine-market goodies. An efficient staffer listened carefully to my budget and requests; he found me an \$8 bottle of Borsao Campo de Borja (a Spanish blend of garnacha and tempranillo) for hanging out on a Sunday afternoon. A rich, divine 2000 Clos Roque D'Aspes, a \$14.99 blend of syrah, grenache and mourvèdre (a grape I'd never heard of) satisfied my request for something relatively inexpensive and delectable that shouldn't be missed. I was thrilled with the selection of wine — Grape Vine carries 5,000 labels — with the staffer's thoughtful attention to my budget and needs, and absolutely with the wines themselves.

Wiggy's

1130 W. Sixth St. 474-9463

In a word: Adventure. My friend Jed knows a lot about wine, most of which he learned while working at Wiggy's during grad school. I stuck my head in one Friday, and Big Al, the pervasive mustachioed older gent, responded to my requests for inexpensive bottles. We looked through the "Under \$10" wall, and poked around some of the 850 bottles of wine. He guided me to a light Spanish white called Las Brisas and a cava called 1+1=3, a sparkling I knew I needed because of the name. Al's questions were direct and astute, and I came away feeling like I'd been completely (and happily) guided.

Vino Vino

4119 Guadalupe St. 465-9282

In three words: Upsell me, please. When I dropped in, my final stop on an afternoon full of wine shopping and not intending to buy much, the only other customer was a bartender for Wink. She and the owner led me to an Albrecht rose sparkling wine (\$16; Vino Vino is committed to low prices on bubbles). At their encouragement, I found myself buying another bottle, an \$18 Casa Zuiliani cabernet franc (I got a bad bottle, returned it without a problem, and bought more bubbles). Vino Vino is in the process of getting permission to sell wines by the glass at its long wood bar. I can't wait to idle away an early evening there, spending more money than intended and being oddly OK with that.

Central Market

4001 N. Lamar Blvd. 324-1000

In a word: Seth. I've never met Seth, but I owe the man. His suggestions are good. I've often asked for advice at Central Market from whomever's about, and I've rarely been disappointed — they're especially good at picking wines when you tell them what you're cooking. But often, when the staffers are busy, I just look for the "Seth's pick" sticker and buy whatever Seth, the wine manager and formerly of the fabulous and now defunct Emilia's, has given his seal of approval. He's never steered me wrong. Seth's also got quite a number of bottles to choose from: Central Market carries 3,500 labels from the Italian spumantes and Spanish cooking sherry to the gorgeous Chileans and chewy Californians.

Twin Liquors Westlake

3652 Bee Cave Road. 327-0315

In two words: Good idea. Twin Liquors trains excellent staff — Ross Outon of Twin Liquors Tech Ridge just made it onto a new wine reality PBS show set to air in 2007 — and Westlake is no exception. I picked up a Falesco Vitiano Umbrian white (\$10.99), an Argentine merlot called Andeluna (\$11.99) the friendly staffer promised would be rich and chocolatey, and a Zonin prosecco (\$10.99). He was efficient, sold me what I needed, laughed at my bad jokes and was helpful in every way. Plus, his descriptions of the wines were accurate and the wines perfect for the occasions I'd described.

Other wine stores to try:

Austin Wine Merchants, World Market, Whole Foods, Twin Liquors Tech Ridge, Vino 100, Lake Travis Wine Trader.

Caption: Jay Janner photos AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Wine buyer Jerry Reid samples a glass at the tasting bar at Guadalupe Street's Vino Vino, where hundreds of bottles of various wines fill one wall, left.

Ha Lam 2005 FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

What would go well with this Edna Valley Syrah at Vin Bistro? Try an Angus beef tenderloin in a veal demi-glace. 2 lines on steak and wine from vin bistro.

Larry Kolvoord 2004 AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Try d'Arenberg's Custodian Grenache from Australia with the pecan-crusting pork tenderloin at Castle Hill Cafe.

Larry Kolvoord 2005 AMERICAN-STATESMAN

At Grape Vine Market, you can choose from 5,000 wines in various price ranges.

Aubrey Edwards 2005 FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Whole Foods offers special wine tastings on Saturdays at the North Lamar Boulevard store.

At the wine bar at Wink, below, Evelyn Pool, left, Kristin Breshears and Darcie Fromholz can enjoy good wine and good food without having to enter the main restaurant. Vinosity, right, uses a riddling rack to store its Champagne.

Bret Brookshire FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Robert Godwin FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN.