



NEW YORK state of wine

The Big Apple is abuzz with exciting venues serving off the beaten track wines, with grower Champagne the toast of the town. *Roger Morris* seeks out the best places in the city to raise a glass or two

“THE WINE scene in New York City is what I like to call ‘re-inventive’. There’s something for everyone, in a really ingenious way. I’ve recently observed lists that are more of an eclectic melting pot, which go beyond French and Italian selections and highlight Greek and Spanish wines that pair especially well with food,” says Alex Schrencengost, head of PR for Wilson Daniels, an American wine importer and distributor that represents such heavyweight classics as Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Biondi Santi and Schramsberg. “There’s always plenty of domestic love from California, but Washington State is well represented too, and New York State is producing some world-class wines now. Even in

wines from Italy, I’m seeing more and more variety, particularly in the volcanic Southern regions such as Etna,” she adds.

We’re living in a golden age of food and wine in NYC, where the polish and precision of the offering can be almost blinding in its variety. The attention is no longer just on classic Michelin-starred restaurants in uptown Manhattan.

BROOKLYN’S ON FIRE!

Pete Wells, the food critic for *The New York Times*, who is as keen an observer as any fine dining reviewer, and a lot more entertaining, seems to be spending less time in Manhattan than he does in Brooklyn these days, which is now a real foodie destination. Last spring, the first

big architectural complex to rise up in ages, Hudson Yards in midtown’s Hell’s Kitchen, brought with it iconic restaurants from big-name chefs like Thomas Keller and Costas Spiliadis.

So which wines offered by the glass are getting New York sommeliers hot under the collar? Among the trendy pours at the moment are Champagnes, especially bottles from growers and in large formats; wines that have some claim to ‘authenticity’; wines from out-of-the-way places, like small islands and volcano slopes; overlooked affordable gems from classic wine regions, and ‘natural’ wines, which are now part of a broader category including organic and biodynamic expressions. More importantly, the New

York wine scene is about a new attitude on the part of both the trade and consumers. "If I could use one term to explain the New York wine scene right now, it would be that everyone is seeking to have an engaged dining experience," says Jeffrey Porter, drinks operations director for the Batali and Bastianich Hospitality Group. No longer is wine service a largely silent part of dining out. "Sommeliers are being interactive in explaining things to customers, as that's what younger customers are seeking," he says. "People want experiences."

Those experiences begin with wines by the glass. "I always need an approachable wine by the glass - usually something outside the box at around US\$15 (£12) - to

open up a wine dialogue," says Joshua Lit, wine director at Gotham Bar and Grill. He notes that grower Champagnes and wines from northwest Spain are particularly popular. Gianfranco Sorrentino, managing partner of Il Gattopardo, also likes to make wine by the glass a special occasion.

BY-THE-GLASS TASTINGS

"We offer Ornellaia via Coravin in a two-ounce pour for US\$60," he says. "In the past four months we've sold 13 bottles this way." Superstar sommelier Arvid Rosengren, who pours wines at the uber-cool Legacy Records, notes that one of his colleagues will pick a library bottle of a famous wine and "announce on social

media that he will be pouring by-the-glass tastes that evening".

Often, successful wines by the glass will move to a restaurant's formal list as affordable choices. Rosengren says the city has "many restaurants with small, well curated wine lists, and it's more difficult to make a great small list than it is to make an extensive one". Even restaurants owned by star chefs, like Thomas Keller's new TAK Room in Hudson Yards, strive to have lower-priced alternatives. "As the prices of certain wines are getting incredibly expensive, especially Burgundy, the wines from Beaujolais, Jura and the Loire Valley offer a great value," says TAK Room drinks director Michel Couvreur. >



Celebrity chef Thomas Keller

Dozens of high-profile eateries maintain extensive lists of iconic wines, often several vintages deep. But as sommeliers develop their trade contacts, Rosengren says, "As the demand side is greater than the supply side, there are a lot of wines being purchased by drinks directors on the grey market from middlemen who buy from sources in Europe."

Much of New York's vibrant wine scene is being driven by a new breed of sommeliers and beverage managers who have emerged in the past decade. "The difference from 10 years ago is that top sommeliers are visiting European vineyards two to three times a year, and are developing their own relationships with winemakers," says Will Sugerman, vice-president of importer Vintus New York. "Everyone wants to discover the small producer making exceptional wines before the secret is out," agrees Charles Puglia, drinks director at Parisian bistro Le Coucou on Lafayette Street.



The NoMad's Thomas Pastuszak

'Younger drinkers like to know the story behind their wines, especially if they are out of the mainstream'

"Today, sommeliers and chefs work more equally as a restaurant team," says Jenni Guizio, drinks director of the Union Square Hospitality Group. "Also, many somms have large followings on Instagram."

Thomas Pastuszak, drinks director at Daniel Humm's NoMad, says, "People in the wine service industry no longer see it as just being a job, but as a profession, and one that commands more respect."

STORY BEHIND THE WINE

As sommeliers have become more powerful and more knowledgeable, so has their clientele. "Guests are savvy and do their homework," Lit says. "Often if I recommend a wine, they will use their phones to type the name into Google," adding that it can be annoying to be second-guessed by the internet. "Younger drinkers like to know the story behind their wines, especially if they are out of the mainstream," Sorrentino adds.

Then there is the matter of where the dining and drinking experience meets wine economics. Many restaurants are willing to allow a customer to bring along a special bottle of wine to dinner for a reasonable corkage fee – but it pays to check first. Bottle mark-ups are astronomical compared to European standards, generally three to four times the amount the restaurant pays for it, although there are exceptions. Several somms say the mark-up is sometimes less for Champagne and for wines on their list that they want to promote.

Tipping in New York is often a shock to Europeans. Sommeliers say that normal tipping for good service is 18-20% of the total wine bill before taxes, as it is with food. It's also difficult to split out tipping for food service and tipping for wine service, no matter how expensive the bottle, as charges for both the meal and wine are generally combined before the tab is presented. A few high-end restaurants do not allow tipping, such as Guizio's Union Square group, but the trend to abandon gratuities has largely receded. While more NY restaurants and bars are focusing on classic cocktails and craft beers, don't believe rumours that the younger generation is drinking less wine. "I keep hearing that people are drinking less wine," Sugerman of Vintus notes. "But that's not anyone I know." db

10 New York wine experiences

Choosing the 10 best New York restaurants and bars for wine lovers is a tricky task. Instead, we sought recommendations from sommeliers and drinks directors working in the Big Apple to craft a round-up of 10 great New York wine experiences, highlighting interesting venues that cater to a diverse range of palates, budgets and preferences for ambience.

701 West (701 Seventh Ave.) In his three-star review of 701 West, *New York Times* food critic Pete Wells writes: “Before you sit down, you’ve already learnt that wine is front and centre; that it is more likely to come from classic European estates than, say, Macedonian villages still using amphorae that Odysseus drank from; that the ideal customer is not likely to walk out on being offered a \$66 apéritif; and that the restaurant expects to attract so many of these customers, a single Champagne trolley is not enough.” jfresterants.com/location/701-west

Compagnie des Vins Surnaturels (249 Centre St.) Expect under-the-radar selections such as Xarel.lo from Penedès, or a California Valdiguié and Tannat blend nestled among the classics at this lower Manhattan wine bar. Bespoke wine tastings are available on request. compagnienyc.com

Daniel (60 E. 65th St.) Head sommelier Raj Vaidya can help guide you through the 25,000-bottle wine cellar, or you can order chef Daniel Boulud’s four-course prix-fixe menu at a surprisingly affordable US\$158 with top wines to match (US\$142) for a US\$300 two Michelin-star treat. danielnyc.com

Del Posto (85 10th Ave.) If you’re in the mood for something Italian, then go to Del Posto. And if you want to splurge, try the eight-course captain’s menu matched with an eight-vintage



extravaganza of Giacomo Conterno Cascina Francia Barolos. delposto.com

Eleven Madison Park (11 Madison Ave.) Come for the three star menu, though the wine won’t disappoint either – it wins awards too. There is a constant buzz about EMP (pictured above), no matter the season. Most recently, chef Daniel Humm and long-time business partner Will Guidara parted ways, and Humm was reportedly dating Steve Jobs’ widow. The events aren’t linked. elevenmadisonpark.com

Gotham Bar & Grill (12 E. 12th St.) Wine director Josh Lit has one of the most impressive wine lists you’ll find in NY, starting with those by the glass, neither trying to impress with pricey classics nor forcing you to Google wines from Tajikistan. The wines pair well with chef Victoria Blamey’s American brasserie fare at this 35-year-old institution. gothambarandgrill.com

Niche Niche (43 Macdougall St.) “Wine should be f*cking fun,” Niche Niche says on its website, so if your definition of fun includes having dinner with wines at a 30-seater venue curated each night by a different wine expert or winery rep, then pull up a chair. nichenichenyc.co

Manhatta (28 Liberty St.) Here’s where to go for wine matched with a Danny Meyer menu, including butter-poached lobster and soft shell crab tempura, that comes with a view of Manhattan from 60 floors up. Happy hour features US\$17 Champagne by the glass, while the wine list is Burgundy-centric. No tipping. manhattarestaurant.com

The Modern (9 W. 53rd St.) The Modern is everyone’s go-to restaurant for excellent wine, two Michelin star food, including dishes like a foie gras tart glazed with slow roast peaches, and impeccable but friendly service – great for a lunch when you want to see and be seen. Its 3,000-bin wine selection from around the world reflects MoMA’s global perspective. And yes, there’s a museum in the building. themodernnyc.com

TAK Room (20 Hudson Yards) With its location in Hudson Yards, Thomas Keller’s new venue offers a view of the river and the yard’s Vessel and Shed architecture, plus a peek back into the ‘60s with live music, continental cuisine and a tableside trolley service. Drinks manager Michel Couvreur suggests beginning with a classic cocktail before diving into the weighty Franco-American wine list. takroomnyc.com