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on what makes some wine bars irresistible – exploring their atmosphere, wine offering and energy

Uncorking Success: Why Some Wine Bars Thrive

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What makes a wine bar memorable, and worth returning to, time and again?

This thought first came to me a couple of years ago standing in a tiny, buzzy wine bar in Spain's Granada. Sipping an affordable Cava served in an unpretentious glass, nibbling on little platefuls of freshly fried seafood – calamari and tiny sardines – I was having the time of my life. The bar was jammed with happy revellers, and the smiling, run-off-their-feet staff were pouring wines faster than you could say *fritura de pescado* (seafood tapas platter). In the blink of an eye, they would go through more bottles of wine than a Michelin-starred restaurant might serve in a week. We returned twice more before we left Granada, each time to a similar vibe.

In an era when food and beverage spaces are being redefined every day, this question deserves a thought. In fact, it crossed my mind again recently while I was seated at an alfresco picnic table at Bengaluru's Wine in Progress wine bar. There were nibbles, multiple glasses of different wines before us and plenty of good company. A fun time was had by all.

I recalled another favourite haunt: Chef Greg Marchand's Frenchie Bar à Vins in the 2nd

arrondissement in Paris. With communal tables, friendly sommeliers whose sole aim is to unite you with a wine you would love, and delicious, creative small plates, this no-reservations wine bar has been a trendsetter from day one, with snaking queues outside awaiting opening hour. If I was in the mood for something even more fuss-free, Bar Etna in Paris' Saint-Germain-des-Prés, with its easy tapas-style menu and natural wines works like a charm. The wine selection is changeable: the owner just scoops a bunch of bottles and brings them over for you to pick from, never subjecting you to that dreaded pressure of nodding yes to a wine you don't really like. Wines by the glass begin at five euros, and once, the owner even swapped out a too-funky bottle of wine for us, no questions asked.

I like that.

So, what is it exactly in a wine bar that brings you back, time and again? It seemed to me that the dial is shifting towards the enjoyment of wine without the trappings that it is often entangled in, sometimes unknowingly.

Since I had too many favourites to count, I decided to enlist the help and opinions of other wine lovers. Wine Park importer Vishal Kadakia was a perfect subject: he has spent as much time

travelling and drinking wines around the world as he has selling them. He swiftly came back with his answer: Logroño, in Spain's Rioja. It was not just one bar for him, but a cluster of wine bars that ticked all the right boxes, he said. Logroño is the capital of Rioja, ergo wine runs through its veins.

"Logroño's town square has over 200 wine bars in one small space. You can find bars that are famous for making just a single dish over generations. I would hop between 8 to 10 bars every night, enjoying the local wines (mostly Rioja, but also Ribera del Duero, and Spanish whites – Godello, Albariño). The whole town has a vibe that puts wine in top gear. In this setting, it's hard not to love the experience." It is a similar experience in San Sebastian Old Town's famous pintxo bars, but Logroño wins, he avers.

Arijit Bose, the man behind Wine in Progress and numerous cocktail bars in India, has a slightly different take but insists the secret sauce remains the fun atmosphere a bar offers. "I like a wine bar that doesn't try too hard, but stays grounded in its hospitality," he says, "It should have very good food, nice wine and music." These make for a winning formula, whether you visit alone or with friends. Genuine recommendations from the bar staff also helps. "I like it when the crew handling the place talk about the wines they like to drink themselves." Among his top picks he ranks Singapore's Wine RVLT (it dubs itself 'a ridiculously fun wine bar'), Mod Kaew Wine Bar in Bangkok – a tiny natural wine bar – and his "absolute favourite", Bacchanal in New Orleans.

Of course, that is not to say that more sophisticated wine bars with tastevin-sporting sommeliers should be shrugged off as irrelevant. I have had equally fond memories at the very glitzy 67 Pall Mall clubroom, where the glasses are wafer-thin and the wine list a weighty tome, inviting you to explore multiple regions



Wine RLVT, the wine bar in Singapore

and vintages. And at Noble Rot, quaffing oysters with Chablis or experimenting with food and wine pairing. Both places are always chock-full of wine drinkers, too. Of course, they might well see you finish with your wallet considerably lighter than said bar in Grenada.

Which is why, though I love occasional visits to swish wine bars, my preferred spaces are those that emphasise good cheer and enjoyment first. Whichever way you look at it, ambience, service, and décor are all intended to pay homage to the hero factor of any wine bar – the wine itself.

Chef Manu Chandra, whose love for wine matches his discerning palate, agrees with me. That is why his favourite wine bar is Bottega del Vino in Verona, which, coincidentally, is owned by a consortium of famous-name Valpolicella producers and it is also located in a historic setting.

"I have never seen wine celebrated with as much passion, happiness, and *joie de vivre* anywhere else in the world," he says. "The crowd here spills out onto the streets, wine glasses in hand, akin to crowds outside a British pub. It has an Italian wine list second to none – and the wines are a steal. You are bound to bump into a winemaker or two. It doesn't try too hard to be anything specific, and this, coupled with the old-world charms of an ancient Italian town, makes it my numero uno." ♦

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