

ON WINE

7 Insider Wine Bars That Sommeliers Belly Up To

Lettie Teague asked seven sommeliers in seven cities where they like to drink on their days off. Follow their lead to the best under-the-radar wine bars, deepest cellars, most daring lists and savviest crowds to drink with across the country



HIT LISTS | Manhattan's Compagnie des Vins Surnaturels. PHOTO: ALICE GAO



By

Lettie Teague

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IF YOUR JOB included selecting, tasting and serving some of the greatest wines in the world, where would you choose to drink wine on your day off? That was the question I posed to seven top wine directors in seven cities across the country. I hoped they'd name some under-the-radar destinations where the wines were well-chosen and well-priced and the staff was knowledgeable without being uptight. The wine directors did that and more, responding with a range of great places that included restaurants with deep cellars of old bottles as well as local hole-in-the-wall favorites. Here, their top picks:



High Treason in San Francisco. PHOTO: HIGH TREASON

Shelley Lindgren

*Wine director and co-owner,
A16 and SPQR, San Francisco,
A16 Rockridge, Oakland*

Recommends: High Treason,
443 Clement St., San
Francisco

"It's a little off the beaten path, in a nondescript location," said Ms. Lindgren about her favorite drinking spot. But the wines on offer

are anything but nondescript. High Treason's co-owner and wine director, Michael Ireland, an alumnus of Meadowood in Napa and Quince in San Francisco, has assembled a tight list of wine, sake and beer from small producers, and the cider and Sherry selections are large. On Sommelier Mondays, starting around 6:30 p.m. and continuing late into the night, "everyone in the wine business comes by and spins records," said Ms. Lindgren. The evenings came about organically thanks to San Francisco's tight community of sommeliers, who gravitated to the bar soon after it opened last year in the Inner Richmond district. The name refers to Mr. Ireland and his partners, who relish the "treason" of forswearing their fine-dining training to open this simple wine bar.



Shelley Lindgren ILLUSTRATION: MATTHEW COOK

Maria Garcia

Wine director, République, Los Angeles

Recommends: Bar Bandini, 2150 West Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles

Ms. Garcia's regular wine haunt requires a 20-minute drive. "It's in Echo Park, so it's not super-close to me, but I'll make the trek," she said. The selection is very eclectic and changes fairly often; Ms. Garcia visits a couple of times a month, after work and on her day off. Bar Bandini's wine director and co-owner, Jason Piggott, insisted his list is not "purposely geeky." Instead, it's oriented to natural wines that are typically lower in alcohol and easier to drink—"gluggable" in Mr. Piggott's terms—like Cabernet Franc from the Loire. Non-professionals and wine drinkers from outside the neighborhood should know that the bar has no phone number to call if they get lost. "What's the point?" said Mr. Piggott. "We wouldn't answer it anyway."



Maria Garcia ILLUSTRATION: MATTHEW COOK

Raj Vaidya

Head sommelier, Restaurant Daniel and the Dinex Group, New York

Recommends: Compagnie des Vins Surnaturels 249 Centre St., New York

At this chic downtown outpost of a popular Paris wine bar, managing partner and wine director Caleb Ganzer offers plenty of "Scooby snacks for sommeliers," said Mr. Vaidya. By that he means wines that sommeliers like to drink—small-production Champagnes, Chablis, obscure wines from the Jura—and some very good food as well. "In Paris it's a natural-wine bar, but in New York Caleb has taken it to a whole different level: It's more like a restaurant," said Mr. Vaidya. He usually visits on Sundays and Monday nights, when, starting at 9:30, the bar features "mixtapes" of wines and music chosen by guest wine directors, winemakers,



Raj Vaidya ILLUSTRATION: MATTHEW COOK

distributors and sommeliers. A recent evening featuring winemaker Larry Stone included music by Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane and Pink Floyd, and wines from superstar producers such as Alain Voge, Simon Bize and Jean-Louis Chave.

Andy Myers

Wine director José Andrés Think Food Group, Washington, D.C.

Recommends: Etto, 1541 14th St. NW, Washington, D.C.

"I just sit at the bar and drink whatever Kat tells me to drink," said Mr. Myers of this "delightfully unassuming" spot in D.C. and its wine director, Kat Hamidi. Ms. Hamidi's list has a very particular point of view, with a near-exclusive focus on wines from Sicily and Beaujolais. The selection includes smatterings of Lambrusco and Prosecco, too, because Ms. Hamidi considers them an ideal match for pizza, and the bar features a wood-fired oven. Quite a few customers seek Ms. Hamidi's guidance, especially if they are unfamiliar with wines such as the 2011 Cottanera Nerello Mascalese "Fatagione," a red wine from Sicily described as "brawny with some chew" on the list. There's a second wine list as well, dubbed "the Holy Trinity" because it features wines from chef/owner



Andy Myers ILLUSTRATION: MATTHEW COOK

Peter Pastan's three favorite Italian producers: Quintarelli, Conterno and Valentini.

Andy Fortgang

Wine director and owner, Le Pigeon, Portland, Ore.

Recommends: Davenport, 2215 East Burnside St., Portland, Ore.

"I think he's been buying more wine than he has any reason to for years," said Mr. Fortgang about this restaurant's wine director and co-owner, Kurt Heilemann. The list is full of "great gems," including many attractive options in the \$50-\$100 range that would easily cost much more elsewhere. Over the last decade, Mr. Heilemann has accumulated an inventory of well-aged, well-priced bottles, including quite a few prize Burgundies and great Champagnes from producers like Pierre Péters and Ulysse Collin. The 2012 Ulysse Collin Blanc de Noirs Les Maillons, for instance, costs around \$90 retail but a mere \$125 on this list—a markup well under the industry standard.



Andy Fortgang ILLUSTRATION: MATTHEW COOK

Jack Mason

Master sommelier, Pappas Bros. Steakhouse, Houston

Recommends: 13 Celsius, 3000 Caroline St., Houston

"13 Celsius is our usual hangout," said Mr. Mason, who drinks and trades tips there with colleagues from the wine world. The place is a favorite in part because of the people but also because "the prices are very affordable," said Mr. Mason. He most often orders a bottle of Champagne and "a little bit of food." (The bar menu features cheeses, salads and panini.) Mr. Mason's most recent order was a bottle of Marc Hebrart Brut Rosé Champagne, at a very reasonable \$82. As for the wine bar's appeal



Jack Mason ILLUSTRATION: MATTHEW COOK

to professionals, proprietor Michael Sammons noted that there was a "straight-up nerd factor" about some of the wines, though plenty of "regular" folk show up as well, especially for 13 Celsius's once-a-month wine classes.

Belinda Chang

Sommelier at large, former managing partner/wine director, Maple & Ash, Chicago

Recommends: The Village, 71 West Monroe St., Chicago

"I really love this place. It's our version of Bern's," said Ms. Chang, referencing Bern's Steakhouse in Tampa, Fla., an institution known for its well-priced older vintages. The list at the Village, an Italian restaurant celebrating its 90th anniversary this year, also runs quite large and features wines purchased decades ago and only gently marked up. "I'm not sure the sommelier, Jared [Gelband], realizes how special the cellar is," said Ms. Chang. I put this to Mr. Gelband, and the 35-year-old wine director assured me he's well aware of how lucky he is. The Village is one of three Italian Village Restaurants at the same address, each with its own bar, and its wine list currently has about 1,100 bottles, ranging from a pleasant, lesser-known Umbrian Grechetto for \$35 to a comprehensive

listing of all the great Super Tuscans,
including Masseto, Solaia and Sassicaia.

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Belinda Chang ILLUSTRATION: MATTHEW COOK

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