

Beirut pops the cork on wine bars as local vintners expand



BEIRUT: Like a flawless word-association experiment, in Beirut these days the phrase “wine bar” is immediately met with the word “trendy.” Over the past decade, the number of wineries in Lebanon has doubled. Now, wine bars are following suit, springing up as havens of calm refinement among the capital’s raucous pubs and glitzy cocktail joints as they rapidly gain popularity on the city’s social scene.

“Wine is becoming trendier day after day,” says Wael Bou Jaoude, who alongside his wife Karen Matta runs CRU wine bar on Hamra’s Makdissi Street.

A relaxed “light-hearted” establishment specializing in boutique Lebanese wines, CRU has been instrumental in making its clientele more aware of a diverse range of locally produced wines, the demand for which has in turn led to increased innovation in terms of the grape varietals planted and the types of wine produced in the country.

“We want everyone to get the chance to taste it [the wine],” Bou Jaoude says, adding that CRU has over 100 wines – some foreign – on its menu. More than 20 of these are served by the glass.

Two popular by-the-glass wines at the moment are the Syrian produced Bargylus and the Lebanese label Marsayas, says Bou Jaoude, noting that CRU will introduce a new wine menu in the coming weeks featuring some additional Lebanese labels alongside Italian wines.

“We need to keep clients tasting different things,” he says. The relaxed venue offers wine-tasting sessions for groups, giving enthusiasts the chance to sample seven to eight wines, and for those who wish to wine and dine, a menu of fresh “French-orientated cuisine” is available.

Lovers of melted cheese might particularly enjoy fondue Tuesdays.

Wine bars may at first seem a little formulaic, and indeed at most of Lebanon’s offerings you’ll find typical cheese and cold cut platters alongside the selection of red and white fermented grape juices.

But for aspiring wine connoisseurs frequenting these establishments on a taste adventure, each one offers something a little different.

One of the city’s earlier wine bars, L’Osteria, was serving Italian and Lebanese wines from its Mar Mikhael premises long before the term

“trendy” was applied to either the neighborhood or the genre.

The selection here is smaller than at most wine bars, with just 13 by-the-glass offerings, but the rustic ambiance in this wood and stone interior is wonderful. Italian and French cheese and charcuterie platters are offered as edible accompaniments, while on Sundays and Mondays live jazz and soft rock enhance the experience further.

Right next door to L’Osteria is what may appear to be its younger and perhaps hipper sibling. Occupying a very similar cavern-like stone space, V Comme Vin has gone for a more lavish red velvet interior and a much larger – and mainly French – range of wine.

Since it first opened 18 months ago, the venue has already undergone one change of management; however, when contacted, staff told The Daily Star that these days they are definitely noticing an increased demand for wine.

V Comme Vin stocks 105 different wines, which, in addition to French, include Argentinian, Italian and Spanish bottles among others. The bar also has exciting plans to introduce its interpretation of the traditional happy hour – a “happy wine-tasting hour.”

The Gathering – a recent addition to the Beirut food and drink scene comprising a number of eateries within one courtyard complex on Pasteur Street in Gemmayzeh – also tells The Daily Star that wine drinking is a big trend in Lebanon at present.

At the complex’s wine bar, Lebanese produce is, of course, served, but staff say most customers choose from their imported wine menu, which offers a large selection of French and Italian vintages.

Here, you will find an ever-changing by-the-glass selection – usually comprising one Lebanese wine, one Bordeaux, one Burgundy and one other choice – as well as a huge selection of wines sold by the bottle. One of the charms of The Gathering is that you can start your evening at the wine bar and then move on for dinner elsewhere within the courtyard. Of course, for those who don’t want to progress, cheese and charcuterie platters are on hand for sustenance.

At one of the city’s youngest wine bars you’ll find perhaps one of the largest by-the-glass menus. Society Bistro and Wine Lounge next to Saifi Suites opened just last October and sells some 48 wines by the glass. Most of its stock of 778 bottles is French, sourced from the European country’s famed wine-producing regions.

One well-known Beirut wine bar is more narrowly focused. Burgundy, as the name clearly suggests, specializes in wines from the eponymous region of France, a decision which Ziad Mouawad says is predominantly the product of passion.

“We didn’t open Burgundy because it’s a trend to open wine bars,” Mouawad, one of five partners in the bar, tells The Daily Star. Rather they opened the establishment, which has since expanded to a restaurant, because they love Burgundy wines and wanted to bring them to Lebanon.

Burgundies are unique, Mouawad explains. “[They] are very hard to understand. They are very silky, very smooth, very transparent.”

Produced by smaller wineries and known to be less consistent than Bordeaux and Rhone Valley wines, Burgundies reward wine-enthusiasts who are “searching for magic,” Mouawad says.

“Burgundy will become a good deal when Bordeaux becomes boring,” he says, explaining that the latter is more “full-bodied, rich, heavy” and has “aromas that are easy to find.”

Mouawad laments that his wine bar has gained a reputation for being very expensive and catering exclusively to the high end of the food and drink market. Yes, customers will find \$1,000 bottles of wine on the menu, but Mouawad insists that the patrons he and his colleagues wish to welcome are those who are excited about his wines.

At Burgundy, Mouawad says bottles priced up to \$500 are available for purchase by the glass, and that for those with adventurous palettes but on small budgets, both a selection of \$10-\$15 glasses and a warm and informative welcome are guaranteed.