


BECAUSE MINI-VACATIONS
ARE STILL VACATIONS.



EMBASSY SUI
HOTELS®



Powered by  Citi

For wine lovers, Las Vegas is a best bet

By Lynn Goya, Special to USATODAY.com

Forget *Sideways* and its California wine superiority. Those in the know are hopping the Sierras to indulge in some of the best and the brightest wines the world has to offer in an unexpected place: Las Vegas.



Drink in the view: At the Cellar Masters table at Fleur de Lys, you dine surrounded by wine.

Courtesy Mandalay Bay

"One of the reason to go to wine country is to experience local wine, local culture, local ambience," says Thomas Matthews, executive editor for *Wine Spectator*. "Las Vegas has Egypt and New York and Paris and Italy and all the wine experiences and richness you will get in those countries."

For a town not even on the culinary map 10 years ago, Las Vegas has managed to sprint up the list of the world's great wine and food cities.

"In 1999," says Matthews, "our restaurant dining guide didn't even break out Vegas." Last year, however, Las Vegas restaurants earned 55 Wine Spectator Awards of Excellence, garnering four of the coveted 87-worldwide Grand Awards

"The Las Vegas market is amazing," says Kevin Vogt, master sommelier (M.S.) for Emeril Lagasse's Delmonico Steakhouse at the Venetian. "Nobody is selling the quantity of wine that we are — anywhere in the world." Some Las Vegas restaurants uncork \$4 million in wine annually, Vogt said.

Virtually any wine, no matter how obscure, can be found in Las Vegas. Tony Fisher, a frequent customer of Boa Steakhouse, is a local aficionado who wines and dines every week, sampling vintages he would never find on his own. "Every time I come in, there is something new — a wine from Spain or Italy or New Zealand. I had a [Merlot] a couple of weeks ago from a little five-acre estate in [an obscure] region of Italy."

Top restaurants offer wine lists that routinely exceed 1,000 vintages with tens of thousands of bottles in their cellars. This big investment can only be accomplished with the help of the casino industry's deep pockets. Las Vegas is one place that can still make a profit selling pure indulgence.

"We sell a bottle per day in the \$15,000 to \$17,000 range," says Robert Bigelow, M.S., director of wine services at the Bellagio. Not surprisingly, Bigelow expects resort wine sales to rake in more than \$40 million in 2005. "While gaming remains important; people come here specifically to eat and choose wine from our wine list," Bigelow says.

IF YOU GO ...

Here are some of Vegas'; best bets for great wines with a splash of great advice. The awards are bestowed by *Wine Spectator*

■ **Aureole**
Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino
Andrew Bradbury, M.S.

Acclaimed San Francisco chef Hubert Keller succumbed to Vegas' siren song last year when he opened a second Fleur de Lys in Mandalay Bay,

Advertisement



Grand Award

● [Andre's French Restaurant](#)

401 South Sixth Street
Steve Geddes, M.S.
Best of Award of Excellence
(702) 385-5016

● [Boa Steakhouse](#)

The Forum Shops at Caesars
Jeffrey Blake, Beverage Director
Not yet rated
702-733-7373

● [Bouchon](#)

The Venetian
Michael Anthony, lead sommelier
Not yet rated
702-414-6200

● [Delmonico Steakhouse](#)

The Venetian
Kevin Vogt, M.S.
Grand Award
702.414.3737

● [Fleur de Lys](#)

Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino
In transition
Not yet rated
702-632-940

● [Jazzed Cafe and Vinoteca](#)

8615 West Sahara Avenue
Kirk Offerly, owner/chef
Not rated
702-233-2859

● [Nina Steak House](#)

The Palms
Erin Dobson
Best of Award of Excellence
702.933.9900

● [Picasso at Bellagio](#)

Bellagio
Robert Smith, M.S.,
Grand Award
(877) 2-DINE-LV

● [Piero Selvaggio Valentino](#)

The Venetian
Carlo Cannuscio, General Manager; Grand Award
702-414-3000

● [Rosemary's Restaurant](#)

8125 West Sahara Avenue
Nick Hetzel, Sommelier
Award of Excellence
702-869-2251

● [Spago](#)

The Forum Shops at Caesars
Luis S. de Santos, M.S.
Award of Excellence
(702) 369-2840

● [Sushi Roku](#)

The Forum Shops at Caesars
Kenji Tamida, Saki sommelier
Not yet rated
702-733-7373

tower to retrieve one of the 9,500 bottles.

Emeril Lagasse's Delmonico also offers floor to ceiling wine displays; Los Angeles icon Piero Selvaggio's Venetian restaurant Valentino stuffs wine everywhere he can throw up a rack.

Conventional wisdom has it the city's wine and food culture began when Wolfgang Puck opened Spago at Caesars Palace in 1992; and there is no doubt attracting big-named chefs stimulated the Vegas buzz. The truth may be more indigenous, however.

Stephen Geddes, who created the wine program at Aureole, got bitten with the wine bug in 1989 when he was a busboy at Andre's Rochet's French restaurant, a local institution for 25 years. With encouragement from restaurateurs like Rochet, a slew of young oenophiles (including Geddes, Vogt and Luis de Santos, who oversees Wolfgang Puck's Vegas wine program) working in the restaurant industry began to take wine education seriously.

When Puck and other celebrity chefs began drifting into town over the next decade, "quite a few people were already involved" in the wine culture, Geddes says.

With 15 of the 136 master sommeliers in the world, Vegas wine programs exploded with verve and innovation spurred by a deep-seated sense of camaraderie. The city's sommeliers know and brag about each other's programs.

"Vegas has a quarter of all the master sommeliers in the U.S. — and some of the best," says Fred Dame, M.S., president of the Guild of Sommeliers Education Foundation. Like Matthews, Dame views Las Vegas as one of the top three dining destinations in the country. "For pure service, Las Vegas is one of the best cities in the world. Not only in the pairing of food and wine, but the quality of recommendations from people on the floor is exceptional."

And that's not just talk. "If someone comes in and says they can spend \$100, we'd prefer to dazzle them with something in the \$80 range — something that is more than they expected and less than what they were willing to spend," says Michael Anthony, lead sommelier at Thomas Keller's Bouchon restaurant at the Venetian.

"The key thing is the service," says George McNickle, an eye surgeon who recently moved to Vegas and dines at Pieros weekly. "Everyone here is a professional, these guys are for real, and they take their work seriously," he says.

along with a high-end burger bar (topped with truffles and foie gras). He opened with 650 vintages and nearly 10,000 bottles.

"That's pretty amazing," he concedes. "I worked for years in San Francisco to come to that level — and now we have 950 labels there. In Vegas, you put it together on the day you open the door."

Wine is clearly center stage. Far from sequestering the wine in the back, Keller follows the trend of showcasing his collection. Around Fleur de Lys' Cellar Master's table, a sky-high loft bustles with wine activity. "You are sitting in the midst of all of these beautiful bottles," Keller says. "If you treasure these wines, know the labels, it is like dining in the middle of a museum."

Not everyone is a classically reverent. Aureole's spectacular *Mission Impossible*-styled 42-foot wine tower rises four stories to become the centerpiece of the restaurant. Guests select their wine then watch as "wine angels," women in black cat suits, rappel the glass-and-steel

"I am glad I moved here; (food and wine are) one of the reasons I stay," McNickle says.

Customers aren't the only ones getting dazzled. Wineries are vying for a coveted place on a Vegas wine list. "It is like I have a big target on my back," Bigelow jokes. "Everybody wants their wine here."

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/travel/destinations/2005-04-08-vegas-wine_x.htm

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.