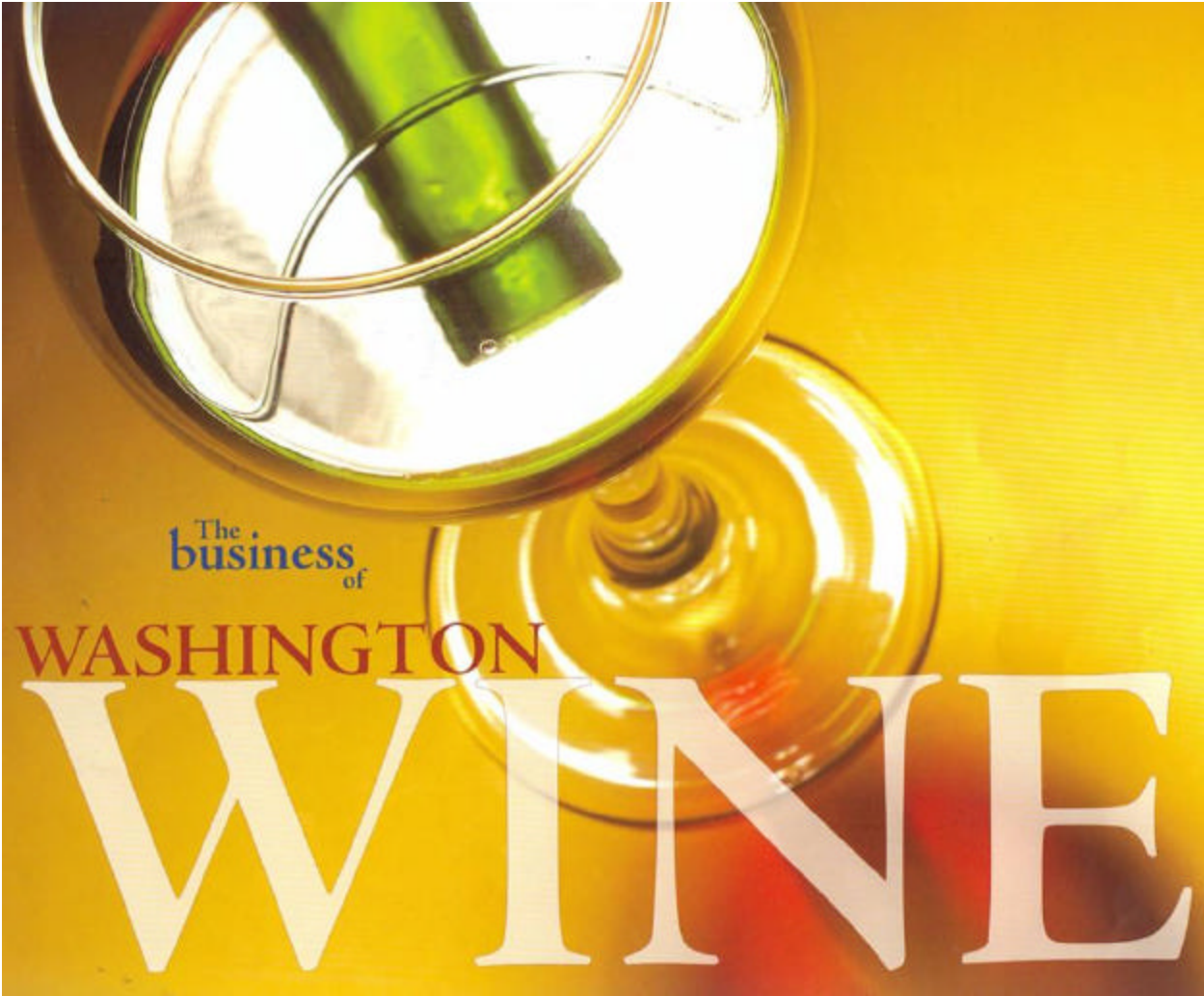


Puget Sound
BUSINESS JOURNAL



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WINE

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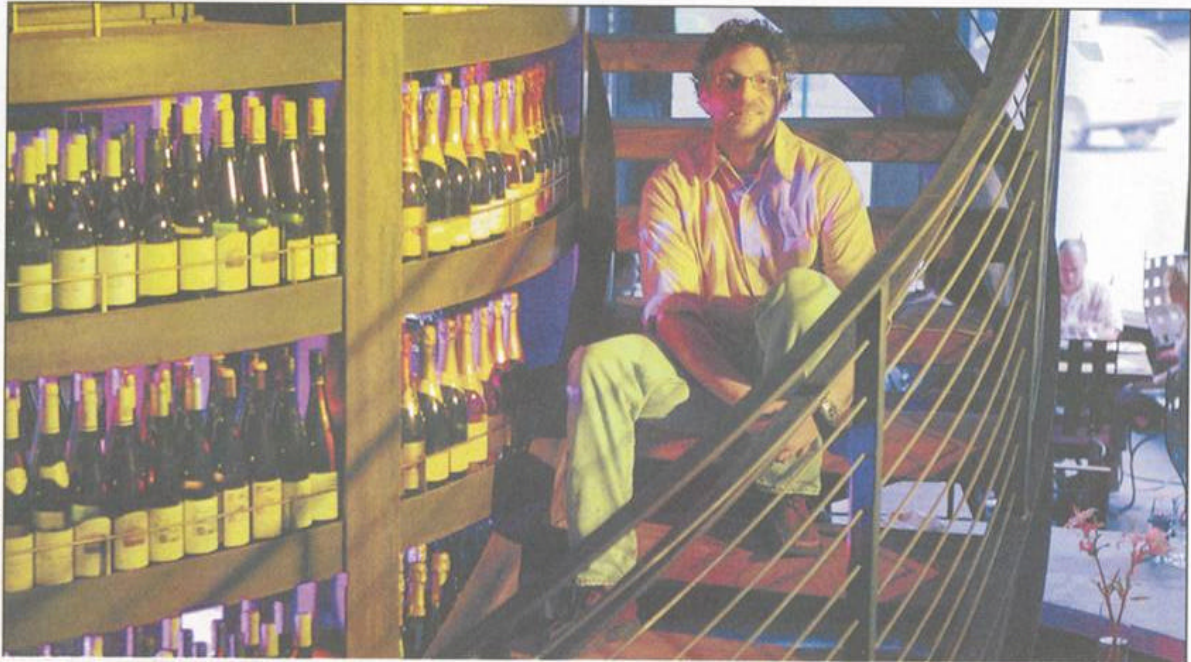
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ON THE COVER: Business Journal photo by Dan Schlatter



Wine bars pour new choices for Seattle



BUSINESS JOURNAL FILE PHOTO/ALAN T. LAMEN

Larry Kurofsky has Purple Café and Wine Bars in Woodinville, Kirkland and this location in downtown Seattle. Now he plans to open one in the new luxury high-rise condominium

On a lovely Saturday night in the Columbia City neighborhood in South Seattle, the Verve Wine Bar and Cellar glows with strategically aimed lighting glinting off of graceful glassware.

A lot of glassware, actually — a number of customers have up to three glasses before them. But it's not the drinking fest it might seem — each glass is filled just halfway, so customers can taste "flights" of wine, that is, samples of similar types of wine they can compare and contrast.

One recent trio of varietals on offer at Verve, labeled the "Southern Hemisphere Red Flight," allowed customers to try sips of a Mourvedre from South Africa, a Carmenere from Chile and a Malbec from Argentina. Similar flights were offered in sparkling wine, classic reds and whites, and Northwest reds.

By ELAINE PORTERFIELD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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Tastings

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Verve represents a relatively recent hybrid in town that combines the casualness of a café with the mood of an unpretentious bar and the educational aspect of a great wine shop.

Seattle has seen growing numbers of



LOCAL VINE PHOTO

Local Vine, in Seattle's Belltown neighborhood, strives for an unpretentious setting and invites people to hang out from morning to late night.

such wine bars, long a part of the dining and drinking scene in Europe, open in the last two years. A partial list includes The Local Vine, Verve, Portalis, Smash Wine Bar and Bistro, Poco Wine Room, The Tasting Room and three branches of Purple Café and Wine Bar, with plans for a fourth branch in Bellevue just announced. Of course, numerous plain old bars, cafés and bistros in the region offer great wine programs, including wines by the glass.

Anthony Anton, president and CEO of Washington Restaurant Association, has been eyeing the trend with interest. Increasingly, Anton said, Americans are seeking specialized dining and drinking establishments when they go out. That's a change from past years, when Americans went out to eat or drink in more general establishments, typically for special occasions. Ethnic or specialized food choices were less common.

"I think you're seeing (wine bars) for a variety of reasons," he said. "The trend nationally is we don't go out just to eat anymore or just to go out for drink. We go out for Thai food, for a margarita. There's been a huge splintering of the hospitality industry."

Couple that with explosion of the fine wine industry in this country and a more educated palate on the part of consumers, and that's a recipe for wine bars, Anton said. In Seattle, given the state's robust wine industry, the second largest in the country, it makes even more sense as a trend.

The Tasting Room, in Post Alley at the Pike Place Market, is part of the trend. Rustic, with warm brown beams

and rough white walls lined with wine bottle-covered shelves, the establishment offers Washington wines by the glass, the flight or the bottle, with a small menu of dishes to complement the wines, such as cheeses, cured meats, and chocolates.

One recent evening found friendly servers more than willing to explain the choices, but also perfectly happy to let customers sip in peace. Wine choices came carefully tagged with paper labels to help customers keep their choices straight.

Anton said the people within the industry also are helpful to each other.

"The other thing I think is really fun is that the wine community in Seattle is very supportive of each other," he said. "They know who the really good ones are, the good sommeliers."

A third factor encouraging the growth of wine bars — and Anton sees room for plenty in the market — is the loosening of liquor control laws. In addition to other aspects, that means a place like Verve can let children in, even sit at what looks like a traditional bar.

"Washington laws have only ... changed in the last 10 years," Anton said. "The liquor control board has been very forward-thinking. You have to

wines frequently to make sure they can knowledgeably inform customers, Bond said.

She also tries to make sure they offer well-priced wines both by the glass and bottle.

"We have a section of great wines that are \$10 and under, which is very popular in the neighborhood," she said. "I find people are very interested in trying new wines. I think the best thing about my wine bar is, my staff is just really low key and fun, and I've had no turnover. I attribute a lot of my success to them."



Munson

Sarah Munson, co-owner of the Local Vine in Belltown, likewise strives for an unpretentious sense at her establishment. She bills herself as "head wine drinker" while her partner Allison Nelson prefers the title "expert wino."

"We just wanted it to be a place

(to enjoy) whether you're into wine or not," Munson said. "People start the day here (in the afternoon) by doing work here, using our Wifi and having coffee."

I find people are very interested in trying new wines."

KATE BOND,
Owner, Verve Wine Bar



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meet regulations, but they're not nearly as restrictive as they once were."

Some of the local wine bars, such as the Purple Café and Wine Bars, are so family friendly that they even offer a kids' menu, complete with macaroni and cheese and a "milk flight" of caramel, chocolate, strawberry and regular.

Larry Kurofsky, owner of the Purple Café and Wine Bars, launched the concept restaurant in 2001 in Woodinville. There, warm woods and wrought iron welcome patrons who want to nosh and sip. He and his wife, Tabitha, expanded the franchise to Kirkland two years later and to downtown Seattle in 2006. For its latest addition, the company will return to the Eastside with a 6,200-square-foot Purple in the new luxury high-rise condominium Bellevue Towers.

Kurofsky said that business has been good. Revenues grew 50 percent year-over-year from 2006 to 2007, and they are expected to double again from 2008 to 2009.

Kate Bond, owner of Verve, opened her wine bar mid-career, in April 2007. She holds a master's degree in public health, and once worked at Group Health Cooperative of Puget Sound. After a detour into construction, she attended wine school at South Seattle Community College before opening Verve. She's also obtained certification from the prestigious Court of Master Sommeliers, based in Britain.

But she tries to keep things low key at her wine bar. Customers can learn as little or as much as they like about wine from the staff, all of whom taste new

That's what Richard Kinsey likes to hear. A mainstay of the wine scene for years in Seattle, Kinsey writes on the topic and opened one of the first wine bars in Seattle, in the 1990s (since closed). He now owns two Wine Outlet stores, one in the Sodo neighborhood of Seattle and one on Elliott Avenue West in the Interbay neighborhood. Wine bars should be casual, he said, but certain standards should be met.

It might seem self-evident, but the staff has got to know its wine list, Kinsey said. Surprisingly, that isn't always true, and it's not helpful to a customer to have servers admit they don't know about a wine, he said.

"They have to know the wines," he said.

A wine bar also distinguishes itself from other establishments by excellent glassware suited to type of wine poured, he said.

Besides "the glass you get it poured into ... and the knowledge of the person serving, it's also about the condition of the wine when you get it," Kinsey said. "Is the white too cold? Is the red too warm? Good wine condition makes a good wine bar, just as much as the selection."

Wine bars should also be casual, comfortable places, he said:

"I think it should be a place you can just drop in. Similar to the coffee culture, you should be able to snuggle into a bar table or booth with a friend and get a really good glass of wine. Not (necessarily) a really expensive glass."

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