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## Wine bars pour culture back into nightlife

By Tiffany Owens  
Special to MSN

Next to an impromptu public speech, it's a common scenario that strikes fear into the heart of many: ordering from an extensive wine list. Red or white? New Zealand or Napa Valley? No one wants to make an improper choice and appear uncultured — especially in front of a group or a date they're trying to impress.

But the wild new crop of wine bars sprouting up across the country is trying to change that elitist mentality. By combining affordable choices in an unpretentious setting, these establishments' focus on education — for both patrons and staff — and are fast becoming the new nightlife trend, following the cigar and martini bars of the previous decade.

This follows on the heels of an increase in domestic grape production. In fact, the United States is now the third-largest wine-producing country, behind France and Italy. As the number of vineyards continues to expand, so do the number of producing wineries. Today there are more than 3,000 wineries — and about as many tasting rooms and wine bars — across America, many of them sprouting up in the past five years.

Add in a movement to promote more tasty choices with fun and quirky labeling in the under-\$20 range and you get a new generation of wine enthusiasts eager to experiment and expand their palates. The [Wine Market Council](#) reports that 21- to 27-year olds now constitute 25 percent of all wine consumers, with many in this age group skipping over the customary "white zin" phase to become instant wine aficionados.

"It's true, Americans — young ones in particular — are becoming less intimidated by wine," says Jane Barrett, formerly of Paterno Wines International in New York and a wine consultant in Maine. "It used to be that your average wine drinker was only comfortable with Chardonnay or Cabernet. They didn't grow up in wine-consuming households, and when they became adults and discovered wine — with its endless choices of regions, varietals and languages — many were overwhelmed. But as these wine drinkers become more experienced, they evolve into bigger risk-takers."

### The social experience

Few realize that this wine revolution has roots in ancient Rome. The original Italian wine bars, or *enotecas*, were traditional gathering places for people to relax, socialize, and sample the regional wines and food. Wine bars have long stood the test of time throughout Europe; in fact, many Americans claim to have received their wine "education" there while traveling or studying abroad.



Proprietors in U.S. cities such as New York and Portland, Ore., are now modeling their wine-bar ventures after this timeless European style, as a new breed of coffeehouse culture or a hip alternative to the regular bar scene.

Since early 2000, U.S. wine consumption has risen steadily, with an all-time record 232 million cases of table wine consumed in 2003, the latest year for which figures are available. Like many other cities, Portland's influx of wine and "small plate" bars in these past five years is a result of consumers' penchant for high-quality fare in cozy atmospheres. "Portland is a very wine-savvy town, spoiled with their own Willamette Valley wine region at the back door," boasts Kimberly Bernosky, owner of the Noble Rot, a restaurant/wine bar that offers up to 50 wines by the glass and five wine flights — typically a "sampler" serving of three to five wines in 2-ounce pours — with food pairings, as well as weekly classes and a retail wine shop. "The current generation of 21-year-olds is weaned on Pinot Noir, the most complicated, ethereal grape in the world. They start at the top and work their way back."

Brian Martin of Portland's Vigne wine bar agrees that the United States has "stepped up" its wine sophistication in recent years in step with the public's desire for increased quality in food and beverages. "Beer and hard liquor are recipe-driven and don't engage the intellect like wine does. The existence of wine bars speaks to a void that exists for those not wishing to be enveloped by the martini-bar fad." Vigne offers more than 800 wines by the bottle, weekly flights and monthly tastings, encompassing a wide variety of regions, producers and grapes.

But stats and demographics aside, the simple fact is, wine bars are increasing in popularity because they're engaging and entertaining on several levels. "Wine bars give people a focus to their socializing: You're not just drinking, you're learning," says Bernosky. "Wine and food are presented in a way that makes dining an adventurous experience."

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*Tiffany Owens is a freelance writer and avid wine enthusiast whose move to Portland, Ore., last year coincided with a desire to be in closer proximity to her favorite Pinot Noirs.*

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