

# RAISING THE BAR

*At the forefront of the country's Euro-centric wine bar trend, Caveau offers a lot more than just vino plus comestibles. We were invited for some by-the-glass socialising*

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When a small gathering of fine food and wine devotees meets one rainy morning in Cape Town, it is only fitting that introductions be made over charcuterie. The venue is Caveau – French for “cellar” (or cave, as it were) – the city’s first true wine bar born of the desire, six years ago, for nothing simpler than a platter of cured meats and a glass of good wine. The protagonists at that time were South African Brendan Crew and French-born Jean Muller, then colleagues at the Cape Grace hotel. With the function of that day going smoothly, the two managers had decided to break early. However, debates over where to go to enjoy the simple pleasures of a European-style wine bar – in a city whose wine history, ironically, dates back some 350 years – yielded no suggestions. In the end, the pair settled on a Cuban restaurant, but the seed for Caveau Wine Bar was sown.

Today, Brendan and Jean – along with new partner, Marc Langlois, former manager at The Mount Nelson Hotel – are hosting lunch for Abigail Donnelly, TASTE’s Food Editor and Allan Mullins, one of South Africa’s few Cape Wine Masters and Woolworths’s wine selector for over 16 years. A glass of salmon-pink Graham Beck Brut Rosé 2007 – an explosion of raspberry fruit with fresh sherbet on the palate and a long fine creamy mousse – shows off the sweetness of slivers of locally

produced chorizo, salami and biltong from the said charcuterie board. The conversation flows, its strands quickly arranging themselves around the restaurant itself. On the exposed brick walls are sepia drawings of the old Georgian building that has in its time functioned as, among other things, boarding school and funeral parlour. Today it filled with financiers reading papers, creatives discussing ideas, lovers in intimate conversation and suppliers delivering porcini and white anchovies.

The score is that of enthusiastic discussion, and at the table this now revolves around an intense ruby-hued Warwick Trilogy 2007, its nose a symphony of ripe red berries, prunes, blackcurrants and liquorice with undertones of dark chocolate and mocha, sweet oak and black pepper. The wine proves the perfect accompaniment to bowls of tender seared beef cubes served with the silkiest of béarnaise sauces. “This is one dish that has never been off the menu,” says Jean, referring to the blackboard menus that are chalked predominantly with a number of tapas-style offerings. “We make the béarnaise fresh every time it’s ordered,” he continues. “You can’t believe how many kilograms of eggs we go through.”

**This page, clockwise from top left: Mark Langlois and Allan Mullins enjoy a glass of preprandial bubbly; pork and mushroom terrine on ciabatta with onion marmalade; decanting the ruby treasures of the vine; brandade (salted cod) with toasted ciabatta. Opposite page: Chalk boards announce an array of tasty tapas-style offerings.**

# Tapas

Beef cubes w/ bearnaise  
Crisp prawns w/ sweet chill  
Lamb samosas w/ tziki  
Cob prandade  
Ciab  
Merguez sausage  
cro  
sarma  
S w/ ponzu  
herb oil  
on crostini  
& chive cremé fraic  
Lamb kofta w/ tomato h  
Pork belly s  
ice  
must



The dish is quickly followed by another – this time the lightest of tempura prawns served with a sweet chilli sauce and a glass of Haut Espoir Rosé 2008. Made from Shiraz grapes from Haut Espoir and a neighbouring farm in the Franschhoek valley, it's a chameleon of a wine that provides a rich, subtle background to the slightly sweet flavour of the fish and its accompanying spicy dip. "It's best enjoyed in its youth," declares Allan, explaining how the wine's combination of Shiraz grapes and fermentation in French oak leads to upfront strawberry flavours with a dry finish and lingering aftertaste.

Plates of traditional Portuguese brandade (salted cod) served with ciabatta toasts are then partnered with the hazelnut, heather, dried pineapple and fig notes of a Vins d'Orrance Chardonnay 2007, while fragrant pork wontons served with tart ponzu make a happy consort to the spicy notes and lingering fruity finish of a Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir 2004. What's quickly becoming clear is that this is no ordinary wine-pairing event, and these are no ordinary wines.

Indeed, an amazing part of the Caveau story is how the restaurant has come to have such an extensive depth of wines on its list. With just R200 000 start-up capital, much of the wine bar's success has to do with a carefully cultivated network of friendships with suppliers. Previous dealings with respected producers like Mike Ratcliffe of Warwick, Jean-Vincent Ridon of Signal Hill and Christophe Durant of Vins d'Orrance, among others, allowed Jean and Brendan their first wine deliveries on consignment. What's more, a fortuitous relationship with Paul Harris and Peter Bayly, the



This page, above: A bottle of the best – Graham Beck's 2007 Brut Rosé. This page, below, clockwise from top left: Beef with béarnaise; Abigail Donnelly; Anton Rupert's Serruria 2006 Chardonnay; Caveau partners (from left) – Jean Muller, Brendan Crew and Mark Langlois.

founders of five-star boutique hotel Ellerman House, enabled Brendan to secure a large portion of what was possibly Cape Town's most extensive vintage wine collection – on consignment! As operations manager for the hotel (moonlighting at Caveau by night), he had enjoyed a good relationship with Harris and Bayly and, when he was instructed to reduce the hotel's 18 000-bottle wine collection to under half, he snapped up the extra wines for the restaurant.

Back to the table where Allan is declaring the Anton Rupert Serruria 2006, served with a Merguez sausage and hummus, the match of the day: "The sweet notes and lingering peach-apricot finish of the chardonnay are just what this spicy sausage needs, and the citrus notes work well with the lemony hummus."

More wines follow, among them, a rare Nicolas van der Merwe Sauvignon Blanc 2007. Brendan, Jean and Mark are resolute in their decision to stock only local wines and base their choices on individual character as much as quality. Indeed, it is herein that the US's *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine found Caveau's uniqueness, granting the wine bar a coveted place on its list of "35 Coolest International Night Spots".

The meal closes with another wine-bar stalwart, the cheese platter, this one comprising a selection of local artisanal greats. Cigars, truffles and a sublimely sweet Signal Hill Straw 2001 follow. By this time other guests have joined the table and are listening intently to Allan explaining how the wine's grapes are dried on straw mats before pressing to increase their sugar content. At Caveau this kind of spontaneous friendship-around-wine, it turns out, is far from unusual, for, while the tables are separate, diners feel that they are part of a larger single gathering. And this geniality, even more than its exceptional wines and rustic tapas-style fare, is what uniquely qualifies Caveau for wine-bar status. **W**



## WINE ON TAP

Local wine bars are putting a new spin on wine tasting, offering a casual atmosphere where a glass of good wine can be enjoyed with a selection of wine-friendly foods. Here, our pick of the best.

### @MONTE WINEBAR AND RESTAURANT

Steal a few moments before the curtain rises at Teatro Montecasino to mellow your mood with a glass of wine or Champagne and a light taster at this trendy night spot. Montecasino, cnr Montecasino Boulevard and William Nicol Drive, Fourways, Johannesburg; tel: (011) 510-7471

### LA BOHEME WINE BAR AND BISTRO

With no fewer than 60 wines by the glass, Caveau's former manager, Faisal, has popped the cork on Sea Point's emerging wine scene. Stunning wine and great food come together at this trendy bistro. 341 Main Road, Sea Point, cnr Albany and Main Roads, Sea Point, Cape Town; tel: (021) 434-8797

### LA FAYETTE WINE BAR & RESTAURANT

The Parisian brasserie comes to Stellenbosch in this intimate nightclub where wine bottles line the walls and the wine list is best explored with pairings off a five-course tasting plate. 1 Andringa Street, Stellenbosch; tel: (021) 886-6777

### SNAP WINE BAR

A lengthy wine list is well matched by a comprehensive menu that features everything from salads to gourmet burgers. Be sure not to miss the monthly wine and food pairing evenings. 41 Marriot Road, Berea, Durban; tel: (031) 309-4160

### W TAPAS BAR

Sporting a stupendous view of the harbour, this Euro-chic wine bar offers a delectable array of wines by the glass. Quaff them with one of their cheese, charcuterie, fish or vegetarian "tapas" platters. Woolworths store, V&A Waterfront, Cape Town; tel: (021) 415-3411