



By Kelly A. Magyatics

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Wine Redesign

From Stemware to Small Plates, How to Help Guests Spot Your Wine Bar in an Increasingly Crowded Field

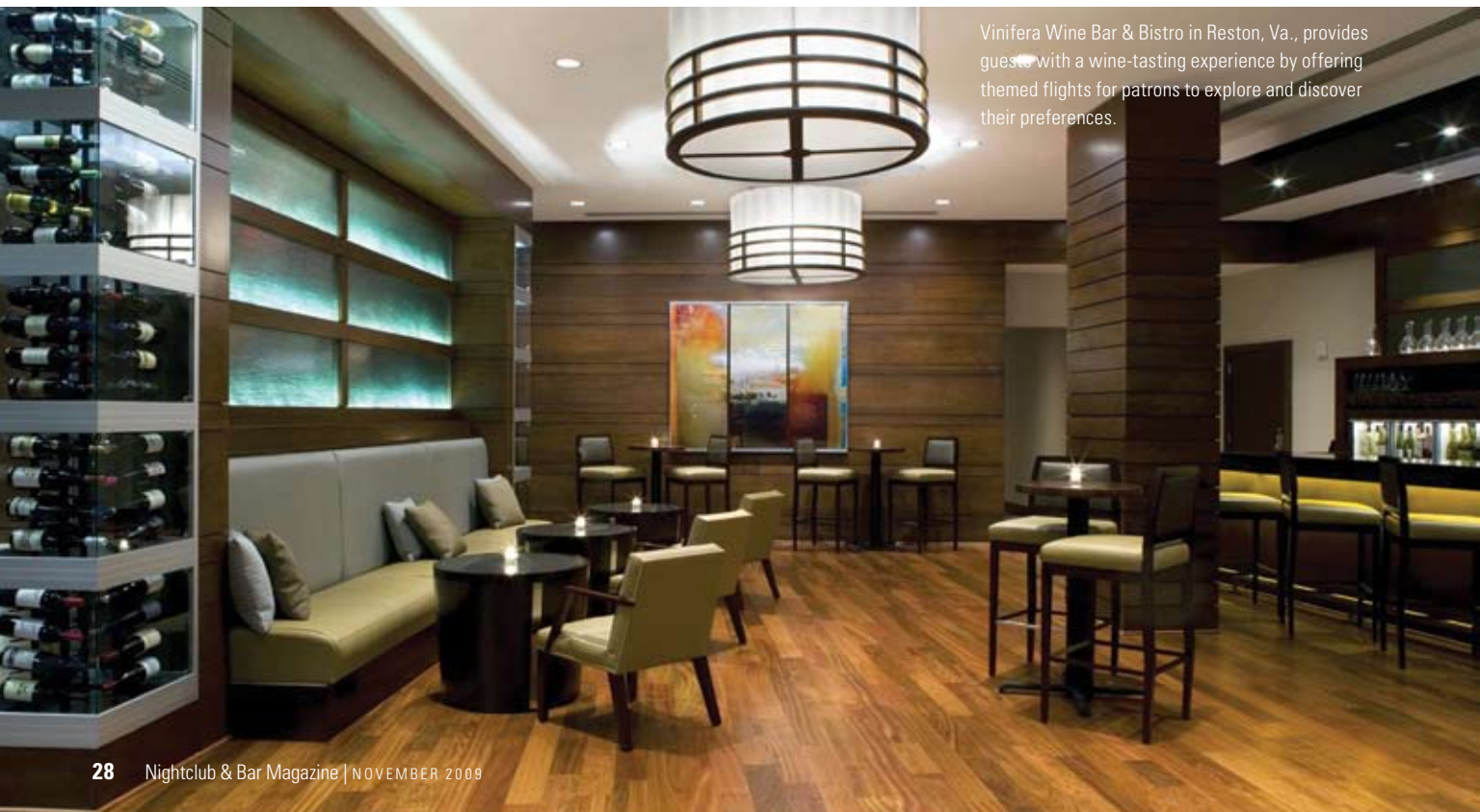
For every well-executed wine bar out there, there is another spot whose owners hastily decided to offer a selection of wines by the glass and slap the moniker “wine bar” outside. So what separates the two? Plenty, not the least of which is ongoing success. Here are some best practices, bar none, for the venue operator who wishes to gain momentum with a strong wine-centric concept:

1. Think outside the bottle ... and even the glass. Brian Cook, wine director for Washington, D.C.’s Sonoma and nearby Bethesda, Md.’s Redwood, believes a “serious” wine bar should offer at least 15 wines by the glass spread across all spectrums and cover at least two price levels. But he also has toyed with unconventional serving sizes that lend themselves to experimentation: 100 ml, 250 ml and 500 ml. No matter

the menu’s size or how it’s arranged (by grape, region or wine style), make it approachable and easy to read. And don’t overdo similar selections — is it really necessary to serve four California Chardonnays by the glass?

2. Seek out wines off the beaten path. Though it’s sound business practice to serve crowd-pleasing wines from easily recognizable producers, pepper the list with revolving options that will pleasantly surprise, like Lagrein or Schiava from Italy’s Alto Adige region, and Aligoté (the “other” white Burgundy.) Giving repeat customers a new experience each time ensures future visits.

3. Offer several interesting flights that change regularly. Three or so half-pours with a thoughtful theme — like different grapes from the same region, or the same grape from different regions — help guests identify what they like



Vinifera Wine Bar & Bistro in Reston, Va., provides guests with a wine-tasting experience by offering themed flights for patrons to explore and discover their preferences.



and why, explains Jason Meringola, general manager and sommelier of Vinifera Wine Bar and Bistro in Reston, Va.

4. Let the customers decide how much education they want. Wine bars are about sipping and learning, but customers also crave a fun and relaxing experience. "Guests who come to a wine bar generally have a strong base knowledge and do not need or want a 'Wine 101,'" Meringola explains. Ongoing staff education is key, but also consider setting out blank tasting note sheets and popular wine books on tables, like Kevin Zraly's *Windows on the World Complete Wine Course* and Karen MacNeil's *The Wine Bible*, for self-serve beverage education.

5. Don't skimp on glassware. Consumers can be put off if they notice by-the-glass wines served in lower-end stemware, while bottles are accompanied by designer glasses. Even if you can't afford top-of-the-line brands, opt for quality glasses with large bowls and the thinnest rims that can withstand constant use. This will show guests who order two half-

glasses of wine that they are just as important as a group who selects a Grand Cru Burgundy.

6. Don't make food an afterthought. Redwood's Cook recommends small plates that complement the wines, aren't too fussy and require few if any utensils. "Dishes which present flavors that pair well with the wines offered by the wine bar (mushrooms with Pinot Noir, spicy sausage with a Syrah) will offer the guest a great way to learn more about food and wine pairings." Build-your-own charcuterie and cheese plates from à la carte options also render endless combinations for sipping and noshing.

7. Preserve and protect. Wine preservation systems are a must for any wine bar. Meringolo swears by the Cruvet system, which uses nitrogen to prevent oxygen from deteriorating the wine. Much less expensive are canisters of inert gas that create a barrier at the top of the bottle. Any method has the two-fold result of preserving your investment and offering guests wine they have always wanted to try without committing to a full bottle — a win-win situation, indeed.

8. Pinpoint your audience beyond "wine lovers." Having an underlying passion for wine is a great starting point, but as Cook points out, "Just like any other business, you should always have a plan and identify what needs aren't being met in a certain neighborhood or type of place." Sound market research and a definitive theme for your wine bar will prevent a generic, haphazard feel. **NCB**