

by *Chris_Barnett*

Think the ultimate wine-tasting room is a musty, dank, candlelit cave piled high with oak barrels, where aged nectars of fine grapes are sipped from pure crystal? Might be if you're lucky enough to have access to the great wineries of France or California's Napa Valley.

But in New York City the place to taste one or more of a 100 cult, boutique and rare wines "and meet other wine lovers without being intimidated by snooty oenophiles" is the Clo Wine Bar and Shop. It has no bar, no bartender and no dark grotto atmosphere. Just the opposite.

Clo (www.cloWines.com; 212-823-9898) is a sleek, innovatively designed space on the fourth floor of the Time Warner Center on Columbus Circle. Rectangular in shape, it has two long walls, 8 feet tall and made of industrial-steel walls; one end of the space is a 10-foot-wide front door. There is a sweeping view of Central Park in back, where wine lovers can mingle. Clo is true minimalist, furnished only with communal table, 30 feet long and 2 feet wide, and 32 black, Italian-designed stools.

That's a risk when your guests are essentially strangers. But before long the ice breaks and most are chatting like old friends. A solo visitor from Houston is discussing her buttery chardonnay with a gent sitting across from her who lives in Manhattan's upper west side and savoring a syrah. Another guest wonders just how sweet is the riesling.

There is no shortage of answers at the table. For an expert opinion, at least two certified sommeliers are on duty to demystify the varietals. Meantime, guests are walking around, getting acquainted and what's in their glass is the conversation starter. One tip: It's a bit gauche to network for business here.

The secret to Clo's success is its interactivity "and I'm not just talking about the socializing and sharing wines. The communal table has six touch-screen "viewing stations" embedded in its faux marble top. An electronic wine list is displayed by overhead projector. Touch the screen for a particular wine and you can read tasting notes on the flavor, the region and the appellation written for Clo by a master sommelier, plus it quotes the price.

Make a selection, walk over to the Enomatic dispensing machine, insert your Clo card, and it pours a perfect 4 ounces into a crystal glass. Prices range from \$7 for a dry white from Argentina to \$100. Currently, a 2005 Colgin cabernet sauvignon for \$92 a glass is near the top of the price list. Clo also has a rare bottle of 1863 Barbeito, a madeira dessert wine that commands \$98 for a mere 2-ounce tasting. Another 100 wines from 18 countries are sold by the bottle.

The idea man behind is Clo is 38-year-old Andrew Bradbury, a high-energy, high-tech guy and candidate for a master sommelier designation — like a P.T. Barnum of wine. Before moving to Manhattan, he was wine director at Charlie Parker's hip Aureole in Las Vegas, which has a stunning four-story "wine tower" with "wine angels" who ascend the heavens to select a bottle and descend to pour a glass for wide-eyed guests.

At Clo, Bradbury's design ideas have run wild — albeit strategically. The exteriors of the steel walls are eye-catching showcases for glasses, decanters, wine buckets, accessories and viticultural memorabilia from around the globe — all for sale. Hence you have a wine bar and a retail shop, but they don't interfere with each other. Bradbury has also eliminated a necessary annoyance — the bill. You can buy a debit or credit version of a Clo Tasting Card, which activates the wine dispensing machine and tallies your tastings.

Wine is supposed to be enjoyed with food, so Clo sells better cheeses at \$15 for a plate of three and \$20 for a plate of five. The charcuterie list is small but exotic and includes a sweet-and-salty cured pork called sopressata, a mortadella with pistachios throughout and a spicy hot coppacola (think prosciutto) at \$6 a piece. A mousse pate with black truffles is \$9.

Bradbury purposely keeps a tight rein on his menu. "We're surrounded on this floor by some of the top restaurants in the country — Masa's, Thomas Keller's Per Se and Porterhouse," he said. "In fact, we send them customers."

A Napa, Calif., native, Bradbury says he created Clo to show the "younger, style-conscious customer that wine is something that shouldn't be scary. After all, it's just grape juice."

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