

Barnett on Business Travel: Restaurant bar wines and dines locals and guests in Philly

by *Chris_Barnett*

Fair warning for travelers to the City of Brotherly Love. Don't call Philadelphia the "next New York" just because the saloon and restaurant scene here is suddenly smokin' hot. Locals cringe. In fact, for libation lovers, Philly may even be cooler than Gotham but on a smaller scale.

At the Water Works, a onetime utility circa 1812, barmaestro Mariaelena Galie makes her Manhattan by infusing super smooth Knob Creek bourbon with sour cherries for 38 hours before dropping in the sweet vermouth and a dash of bitters, \$12.

Chris and Mary Anne Mullins, owners of McGillins Olde Ale House, the city's oldest continuously operating bar (1860), pours a shockingly tasty Pumpkin Martini - vanilla vodka, pumpkin schnapps- a mere \$5.

It's always a good sign when a husband and wife own a bar and work it. Vintage (129 S. 13th St.; 215-922-3095; www.vintage-philadelphia.com) is a prime example. Jason and Delphine Evenchik bill Vintage as a wine bar. The exposed brick walls, 23-stool zinc-topped bar, warm earth tones and yellows, and 60 wines by the glass is convincing enough to pitch it as a oenophile hangout where obsessed grape lovers would nose the crystal and mutter things like "grassy, hint of tobacco, strong apricot."

After all, Paris-born Delphine's papa was a wine connoisseur; she's a former actress turned certified sommelier. Jason waited tables in the Bastille and in Philly's tony Le Bec Fin. He's also a mime but "not your typical Marcel Marceau," he smiles. Nevertheless, Vintage is baptized Anglican with 30 beers, and a primo collection of fine liquors - all the stylish vodkas, gins, rums and tequilas. Something for every thirst and picky palate.

The place is a crowd pleaser and always crowded with everyone from pols to profs, bankers to barristers, hairdressers to tattoo artists. Former Wharton Business School dean of admissions, James Johnston, now CEO of Sage Scholars Inc., is a huge fan. Foot on the rail, two great merlots on the zinc, he was recently trying to recruit Thiel College president, Lance Masters, to forgo academia and join his nationwide tuition funding company for private universities.

"This is just a gorgeous gathering place with a great variety of drinks and fascinating people," adds the wry and witty Johnston. "At this bar, they talk about everything important - from the Philly Eagles to the Philadelphia Orchestra and the ballet."

Under 14-foot ceilings dominated by a quirky chandelier modeled after a 100-year-old wine bottle drying rack, the place is packed during a 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. "happy hour" on the weekdays. A half dozen wines fetch \$3

a glass instead of the usual \$5. They're not jug vinos either. The Evenchiks pour a cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, merlot, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc. Most of the varietals are French and Italian.

Ying Ying Lager brewed in Pottstown, Pa., normally on tap for \$4, is \$2 during happy hour. No one likes to drink on an empty stomach so Vintage has a kitchen. An Icelandic-American chef named Keith Murphy turns out treats like garlic drenched escargot, steak and pom frites, cheese plates and French onion soup. For \$11, the Angus beef cheeseburger with Applewood bacon is a protein rush.

Barkeeps, though, are pure Philly. "We hire only pros, no students," insists Jason. True enough. A mixologist named Andy Pruss may be the next Bruce Willis (who, as many know, was a bartender and struggling actor in New York before discovery and \$20 million-plus film paydays).

Vintage really is a coliseum for social lions. "Everyone talks to everyone," says Jason. "There are no strangers here."

Solo women travelers can drop by for a wine and feel comfortable. Andy, the barkeep, is good at shmoozing up first-timers and out-of-town visitors.

Vintage isn't pretentious. It doesn't have a 10,000-bottle cellar or any snobbishness. The Kono Sauvignon Blanc, Granny Smith apples to the nose and palate, from New Zealand Marlborough region is \$9 and a crisp, citrus-ish Gruner Veltliner from Austria is \$10. Plus, there are at least 58 other wines by the glass to try without having to crack a cork on a full bottle. One novel twist: While cocktails are offered, they're not that popular at Vintage. At least they're an option. You can't get an Old Fashioned or a shot of Old Crow at a California wine bar.

Delphine and Jason Evenchik must be doing something right. Around 11 p.m., chefs, servers, busboys, bartenders who work at other restaurants and hotels nearby drop in to decompress and gossip with each other over something cold and soothing. If they're hungry, the stoves in the Vintage kitchen are fired up until midnight. When the competition comes in to spend their money in your place, that's the supreme accolade, a five-star review.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles.

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