

CATCHING UP WITH
SAN FRANCISCO'S
BEVERAGE TRENDSETTERS

Bay Laurels

BY DEBORAH PARKER WONG

The dust has settled after a flurry of restaurant openings in San Francisco last fall. Taking stock at the six-month mark, we've spotted a few trends in on-premise drinking and dining and not a food truck in sight. Finely-tuned beverage programs and the talents behind them are taking center stage in the reinterpretation and renovation of the City's dining scene, one that is thriving under the direction of seasoned veterans and newcomers alike. For some, cuisine provides the soaring inspiration behind beverage pairings and, for others, it plays a solid supporting role that lets a list shine without pretension.



Alan Murray, MS, made it a point to add newer California labels to the list at Mourad.

PHOTO: STEPHANIE SECREST

Elegant Ethnic

Chef Mourad Lahlou established a foothold for contemporary Moroccan cuisine when he opened Aziza in San Francisco's outer Richmond district in 2001. For his namesake restaurant Mourad, he's collaborating with Master Sommelier Alan Murray, best known for his tenure as Wine Director at Masa's, to direct the beverage program. "When I dined at Aziza, I saw that the food was wine-friendly with more emphasis on California influences," says Murray. "Mourad is essentially a refined reinterpretation of Lahlou's native cuisine, so we're not dealing with a lot of spice." While Lahlou's cuisine gives Murray more latitude, he points out that some flavors—particularly wines with lots of new oak—don't work as well with Moroccan spices.

When assembling the wine list for Mourad, Murray looked to some old favorites but he's made a point present some fresh faces and a newer direction for California wines including Mathiason, Raj Parr's Sandhi and Red Car. "Knowing that Chardonnay wasn't going to be my first choice, I went for cool-climate wines with little oak and some requisite classics," he says. "It's tough for a guest to get a foothold if the list is too esoteric."

While 70 percent of his 120-bottle list is currently devoted to Old World wines, Murray is looking for spring releases from California and will be adding more domestic wines with a focus on aromatic whites and lower alcohol. "The list will continue to evolve to reflect the interests of our clientele," he says.

The service style at Mourad includes an 11-course tasting menu (\$150) and optional \$75 wine pairing with dishes like lamb shoulder that are designed to be shared by the whole table. "This represents how people dine in Morocco and it makes dining a shared experience," says Murray. Pristine grilled octopus from Japan and a duck basteeya are among the most popular dishes served à la carte.



Cara Patricia Higgins offers "the best value of the best" at Les Clos.

Contemporized Bistro Dining

Sans tablecloths and unwieldy wine lists, the contemporary French bistro has made a return to San Francisco. The most wine-centric of the new crop is Les Clos, a satellite of Saison that opened in September. Managed by Operations Director and Sommelier Cara Patricia Higgins, who is also a partner, Les Clos serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, so it defies being pigeon-holed as a wine bar—but the list says otherwise.

A Chicago native, Higgins got her start as a wine buyer at Michelin-starred Longman and Eagle and moved to the Bay Area a few years ago for the accelerated wine and beverage program at CIA, where she studied with Christie Default and Bob Bath MS. After a stint as Lead Sommelier at Hakkasan, she joined Mark Bright as Cellarmaster at Saison and helped him amass a vast collection of rare Burgundies from different cellars around the city for what became the Bright Wine Fund.

Central to Les Clos's concept is demonstrating that access to Burgundy can be found at a wine bar. "Not many operations invest in these styles of wines," says Higgins. "We've taken a risk to make sure that we're offering the best value of the best." The list, which is interesting and accessible, is focused on by-the-glass offerings that blur the middle ground in terms of pricing. "Value is very important. I've found more entry-level regional wines from really great producers that I can list for under \$60 a bottle," she says. Higgins offers half-bottle carafes and flights and pours three-ounce and six-ounce glasses that give customers a chance to taste wines like a Dagueneau Blanc de Pouilly for \$15.

Noting the uptick in prices for grower Champagnes, Higgins is thrilled with the wines she's sourcing from Eugenio Jardim's *Espirit de Champagne* portfolio. "I strive to have ten or more bottles under \$100 and a solid selection in the \$80 range and that helps us bridge customers from inexpensive to mid-priced wines."



PHOTO: STEPHANIE SECRET

Rustic and Refined

With its carefully edited menu and wine by the glass—selections pitted evenly against cocktails and craft beers, Urchin Bistrot (that's the Old French spelling) epitomizes modern French bistro dining. Located in the original Slanted Door space, it feels right at home in the vibrant mix of ethnic restaurants that line the Valencia corridor. Under the direction of Susan Naderi Johnston, who was General Manager at Amé and partnered with Hiro Sone and Lissa Doumani on the concept, Urchin's intentionally rustic interior stands in contrast to generous portions of refined cuisine.

"The concept is based on *bistronomique*, the fun, casual trend in Paris of food-driven menus and low-key surroundings," says Johnston. While Urchin's clientele tends to skew younger—late 20s and early 30s—the restaurant attracts families in the early evening and Johnston has seen the late night bar business change along with the gentrification of the neighborhood.

Her one-page list has 16 wines by the glass and is 70 percent French, with the remaining 30 percent devoted to the rest of the planet. Taking a cue from the Parisians, she offers still wine and bubbles by the half bottle Erlenmeyer flask—a vessel more commonly known as a beaker. "Twelve to fourteen dollars is our sweet spot for wine by the glass," says Johnston, who caters to a wine-savvy crowd that also has a demonstrable appreciation for cocktails. "The interest in cocktails surprised me," she says.

With bistro staples like gougères, baked mussels and steak frites, the French-Cali menu by Executive Chef Michael Morrison, formerly of Amé and CoCo500, is technique- and seasonally-driven. Retaining those classics helps insure that a future generation of restaurant-goers won't lose sight of the fundamental goodness of basic French fare. Johnston buys wines to elevate the food and she looks to lesser-known producers: "I've gravitated towards organic and biodynamic wines based solely on their quality."

Susan Naderi Johnston skews her list toward French offerings at Urchin Bistrot.

Seasonal Brasserie

Mid-Market Street destination AQ lost its sister restaurant TBD to fire last year but, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, work is underway on both renovating the interior and the concept. Wine Director Allegra Angelo joined AQ last year by way of Miami and has refocused the beverage menu there while she readies a program for the June opening of Bon Marché, a casual oyster bar concept in the nearby Twitter building.

Serendipity and the allure of wine country brought Angelo to San Francisco when owner Chef Mark Liberman was looking for talent to head up AQ's wine program. "I've tasted more wines in the last nine months than in the last three years," she says.

Inspired by AQ's prix-fixe tasting menu format, which offers à la carte at the bar, Angelo has overhauled the list of 350 wines. "At least half of our customers opt for the wine pairings, and whatever we open, we can sell." The list places more emphasis on Old World wines like Northern Rhône and includes classics that sell evenly, but Angelo mixes it up. She lists a "Beyond Zin" page of old-vine California Zinfandel and quarterly features producers like Peay and Copain from Jon Bonné's book *The New California Wine*.

"I want reds with a little more stuffing, wines that fit the happy medium," says Angelo who sells plenty of Grüner-Veltiner and crisp whites. "I like to be experimental and pair a glass of Chablis rimmed



PHOTO: STEPHANIE SECRET

Allegra Angelo has refocused the list at AQ and is also planning the wine program for soon-to-open Bon Marché.

with truffle salt for the first course of the tasting menu," she says.

In creating the list for Bon Marché, which will serve breakfast, lunch and dinner, Angelo drew from previous experience consulting for an oyster bar. She's chosen 50 labels and sorted them by pages that are themed by color, style, place, price and food. "Each page is designed to guide customers by the way they think about wine," she says. "This is brasserie-style and inspired by casual-concept lists that are more approachable and user-friendly." In other words, a roadmap for navigating the wine list without a GPS. **sj**