

# Wine + Design



## RUTH TOBIAS

From daily chalkboard menus and tableside preparations to chef's tables and exhibition kitchens, restaurant settings often incorporate elements of interactivity, fostering a dynamic relationship between customer and cuisine. Considering that wine is a key component of any good meal, shouldn't it, too, be integrated into the décor, the ambiance, the entire dining experience?

*Bin 26 dining room (below) and owners Azita and Babak Bina (bottom right) in Boston.*



Photos courtesy of Peden + Munk (top), Bin 26 Enoteca (bottom left); photo by Heath Robbins (bottom right)



The Royce red-wine room (left top), white-wine room (above), dining room (middle top), entry (middle bottom), and manager and wine director Eric Espuny (bottom) in Pasadena, Calif.

wine programs, offering guests the opportunity to engage with them in entirely new ways.

## Inviting Designs

Take Bin 26, which opened on Boston's Beacon Hill in 2006. Paying homage to the urban *enotecas* of Italy, Babak Bina and his sister-partner Azita compiled an extraordinary wine list—actually a leather-bound booklet—that runs the gamut from Hungarian Furmint to Valle d'Aostan Prématta, offers pours in four sizes (including by the bottle), and provides all manner of amusing explanatory notes, with titles like “How do you spell Grüner Veltliner?” The decor further conveys the invitation to discovery. “We felt that, too often, people are intimidated by wine, so we wanted to make the space as user-friendly, whimsical, and fun as possible,” says Babak Bina. To that end, they worked with the locally based

design firm Office dA. As co-principal Nader Tehrani explains, “We just got around the table and said, ‘OK, this is really all about the wine; what are all the things you do with wine? What’s the medium of wine?’ We knew that wine comes in bottles; we knew that bottles have labels and corks and that cork is a sheathing material; we knew that lamps are usually glazed, just like the bottles; we knew that bottles are like bricks—you can stack them on top of each other.” The result is a modern, streamlined, yet playful space that celebrates the grape at every turn. In the bar area, you can hang your coat on corks and bask in the soft light of a pendant lamp made from a wine bottle. The dining room centers around two pylons encircled by wine racks, while its



Photos courtesy of Peden + Munk  
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RN74 dining room (left) and marketboard (right) in San Francisco.



back wall is papered in labels. And just for fun, the ceilings in the restrooms are covered with upside-down, top-lit wine bottles.

Similarly eye-popping is The Royce in Pasadena, Calif. Designed by Bill Johnson of the Atlanta-based Johnson Studio, the signature restaurant of The Langham Huntington hotel, which opened in November 2010, is simply gorgeous with its blue-accented creamy hues, curvilinear shapes, and etched-glass panels. In lieu of an intimidating wine tower, the entrance is flanked by two sumptuously appointed, glassed-in wine rooms. In one, a white, glass-topped table sits on a white-tile floor; in the other, a

you think of a bottle of red wine.” Since the furniture gives the rooms a lived-in look, “everybody wants to step in,” Espuny observes—and diners who book the chef’s table get to do exactly that, on a premeal tour led by Espuny himself.

## Designed for Wine

The reciprocity between decor and wine service is even more central to San Francisco’s acclaimed RN74, where “the activity of buying wine is part of the environment,” says Adam Farmerie of New York-based design and concept firm AvroKO (which is also overseeing the construction of an RN74 outpost in Seattle). Named for the highway connecting Burgundy to Paris, RN74 reflects the desire of chef Michael Mina and wine director Rajat Parr to recreate “the romance of rail travel in late-1800s France,” Farmerie notes. So he incorporated features of period railway depots, cars, and engines into the long, narrow dining room, which “feels like the long tunnel of an old-school train station”; at one end is a train timetable that, rather than noting arrivals and departures, features wine specials. As Parr explains, “When we have only one bottle left, we put it on the queue at a discount.” Its sale activates the board. “With only a few slots, it’s not that big,” Farmerie observes, “but when it starts flapping, everyone in the restaurant notices”—and even if they don’t, “they’re somehow tapping into the binary idea of stop and go. It’s a really fun way to get information; everything ebbs and flows in a way that’s subtle, but still dynamic.” Laughs Parr, “At times, there’s a

Brass chassis with wine “mailboxes” at PUBLIC in New York.



handsome walnut table rests on a rich, red carpet. In short, they’re color-coded to match the wines stored therein—largely French and California labels, in keeping with chef David Féau’s New American menu. Says manager and wine director Eric Espuny, “The white-wine room has very much the feeling of white wine—dry and metallic; the spirit of brightness, freshness. The red-wine room is warmer, fuller, with more wood; it makes

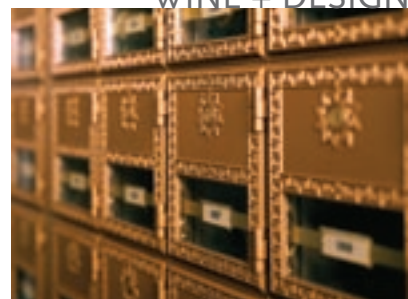
Photos by Michael Weber

little contest between two tables, to see who gets it first.” Similarly, what Parr and Farmerie call a “marketboard,” running the length of the bar, features engraved plates listing 100 bottles for less than \$100 each, rigged with red lights that go on when a wine is ordered. The overall effect, Farmerie says, is to suggest that “you’re on a path to great wine, using train transportation to taste it.”

AvroKO also owns a restaurant group that operates the Michelin-starred, eclectic New York City eatery PUBLIC and its adjacent wine bar, The Monday Room. A key feature of this sleek yet warm restaurant is the brass chassis that lines the entryway, but moves out to open the space for events. Comprising 188 mailboxes, it reinforces a library motif that is further embodied by bookshelves and old-fashioned card catalogs in the dining room. But it also holds wine bottles, forming a sort of private cellar for enrollees in the mailbox program. Explains AvroKO principal Kristina O’Neal, “The intent of the program was to provide a link between our patrons and our chef”—namely, Brad Farmerie, who happens to be the brother of O’Neal’s partner Adam. “We felt there could be an opportunity to literally give our regulars a piece of the restaurant and simultaneously share incredible finds that aren’t typically available for wide distribution.” For a \$50 monthly fee, a subscriber receives the key to a mailbox that is stocked each month with a bottle of wine selected by the chef, along with tasting and pairing notes, event invitations, and the occasional foodstuff. The response “has been fairly sensational,” says O’Neal, and Brad Farmerie agrees: “The positioning in the front of the restaurant immediately interests the guests coming in the door; it lets them know that we do things a little differently, that we try to breathe some fresh air into the ritual of wine.” When his distributors locate “high-quality, small-production wines that fit with our program,” says Farmerie, “they get to move 10 cases in an instant.” And the opportunity to acquire “undervalued large lots with some age” at auction has been a boon: “A few years ago,” Farmerie recalls, “we found a 1997 Kritt Klevner from [Domaine Marc] Kreydenweiss. I knew we had struck gold, which we passed on to our members. An unknown grape with 10-plus years of bottle age is a pretty nice prize to find when you open up your box.” What’s more, the mailbox program “gives us an easy way to know who is in our restaurant, what they are drinking, their likes and dislikes.”

## Wines by the Ounce

Aside from being part of an exploding trend (see box), wine-on-tap programs can also have a fundamental impact on the three-way relationship among design, storage, and service. Atlanta restaurateurs Todd Rushing and Bob Amick discovered as much in 2004, after an investigative tour of West Coast wineries convinced Rushing they could pioneer the use of kegs in a restaurant setting. And they had just the venue for it: TWO urban licks. With 10,000 square feet and 28-foot ceilings, “it could feel like you were in a giant stadium, or we could find an architectural design that took up space,” Rushing recalls. So they commissioned Bill Johnson to place the kitchen in the middle of the dining room, install oversize lighting fixtures, and construct a steel tower big enough to hold 42 stainless-steel barrels—21 kegs for red wine, 21 for white, all temperature-controlled and replenished via a construction lift. Glass-walled and interior-lit, the tower “was designed to be a focal point,” says Rushing, “and that’s exactly what it is.” Adds Johnson, since “anyone can look at the thing and see how it works, it very much fits into the aesthetic” of the dining room as a whole, which is “gritty, not at all polished or finished—big, bold, yet warm and friendly. We wanted to display the wine as honestly as possible.” To



*PUBLIC mailboxes.*

*TWO urban licks wine-keg tower (below) and dining room (bottom) in Atlanta.*



## WINE ON TAP

In 2004, when TWO urban licks opened in Atlanta with the first keg program in the country, restaurateur Todd Rushing admits that “we encountered traditionalists who thought they had to have a cork, a foil, a bottle” to ensure their selection wasn’t “from bag-in-box producers.” In just a few years, times have changed. Tap wine’s advantage of airtight stainless-steel storage has proven beneficial to recession-minded restaurant owners, reducing the overhead costs of bottle waste and, by extension, the list markup. Patrick Lee, who became the first to offer keg pours in Massachusetts when he opened Cambridge’s Russell House Tavern in April 2010, enthuses, “The wine stays fresher longer, it’s served at the correct temperature without fail, there’s no risk of corkage—it’s a win-win-win for the producer, who moves product easily; the restaurant; and the customer, who gets value.”

In addition, reusable kegs are more eco-friendly than bottles, with a smaller carbon footprint in terms of packaging and landfill impact. As a bonus, Rushing points out, speed of service is also improved.

No wonder wine taps are popping up nationwide. Michael and Louise’s Hopleaf Bar in Chicago—best known for its stellar craft-beer selection—is in the process of expanding to eight dedicated wine taps. Although Hopleaf will still offer wine by the bottle for diners who “want the theater of table service with appropriate stemware,” says owner Michael Roper, “the draft wine will be served in a more informal, less intimidating way,” namely by the quarter-, half-, or 1-liter carafe in French Duralex café glasses. The point, he explains, is to give “wine drinkers the same choices that European diners have: *vini di casa* for everyday meals and reserve bottles for special occasions.”

Of course, as the draft-wine movement makes inroads across the country, its pioneers are bound to hit some bumps. Beth Gruitch, co-owner of Euclid Hall Bar & Kitchen in Denver, has found that in comparison to the distribution system in California, Colorado’s procedure for obtaining kegs from out-of-state wineries is “incredibly antiquated” and cost-prohibitive. So she and chef-partner Jennifer Jasinski opted to “stay close to home” by partnering with a respected local winery, Infinite Monkey Theorem, which is now represented on all three of their taps. Euclid Hall’s draft-beer and cocktail lists also emphasize Colorado products. Lee reached the same conclusion at the Russell House Tavern, dedicating its pair of taps to Massachusetts’s own Westport Rivers Winery. “When chef Michael Scelfo began developing the menu, he was sourcing almost all his ingredients from within 20 miles of the restaurant,” says Lee. “So it became an obvious choice; there was never a need to look elsewhere.”

How far can this trend go? As Gruitch observes, “It’s a new venture for most wineries, but I’m seeing more and more of them putting wine into kegs.” Leave it to an Old World tradition to spark a New World revolution.

Pourtal “Enoround” in Santa Monica, Calif.



build on the curiosity inspired by the keg tower, Rushing offers his ever-changing selection of West Coast wines by the decanter in three different sizes as well as by the glass, so customers can mix and match pours and plates to “build their own wine dinners.”

Self-service Enomatic dispensers are also sweeping the country, particularly in the Los Angeles area—from Swill Automatic downtown to The Wine Detective in Pasadena to Pourtal in Santa Monica. As the name suggests, Pourtal owner Stephen Abronson imagined his wine bar, which opened in April 2009, as a gateway for exploration. “I’m kind of an impatient person,” he admits with a laugh, so the 40 1-ounce pours he offers in pressurized machines, operated by prepaid smart cards, allow like-minded drinkers “to learn about wine and try different things.” Granting that “machines can’t take the place of good staff—you have to have a human element,” Abronson has devised virtual “tasting tours” with the help of wine director Rachel Bryan. Three themes are featured every month; for instance, in honor of Valentine’s Day, “Labor of Love” spotlighted eight wines from vineyards run by husband-and-wife teams. Video screens mounted above the dispensers display the names of the tours, though tasting and pairing notes are offered on paper to prevent people from “just standing there and staring” at what Abronson calls the “digital chalkboards.” Indeed, in a venue measuring only 1,000 square feet, says architect and AkarStudios principal Sat Garg, “creating circulation flow was a challenge from the very start.” His solution was to install an “Enoround”—a circular console ringed with dispensers and a bar counter—as the centerpiece of the room. It draws customers to sip and mingle for a while before retreating to tables surrounded by “warm hues and tactile materials,” such as cedar wall panels that highlight the steel Enomatic dispensers within an “intimate and comfortable” context. The entire setup, in short, is designed to bring what Abronson hopes is “some semblance of order and warmth” to self-service.

And that, ultimately, is the point. After all, even the most hands-on sommelier may not easily be able to inspire guests intimidated by an environment in which wine seems out of reach. As many restaurants are finding these days, architecture and interior design can be employed in service of, well, service itself—extending a warm invitation to enophilia that diners can see and feel from the moment they arrive. 🍷

