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Monet and Montrachet: Museums With Great Wine

By [LETTIE TEAGUE](#)

(See Correction & Amplification below.)

Why can't Mouton be found in the same place as Manet? Why is Yellow Tail the pairing of choice with Gauguin and Cézanne? These are the sorts of questions that have come to mind when I've dined at most art-museum restaurants. The menus often seem designed for tourists on budgets (or children on school tours), and the wine lists are rarely oriented to oenophiles.



Brian Stauffer for The Wall Street Journal

Happily, I've found some exceptions to this good art/bad wine rule as increasing numbers of museum directors are focusing more on culinary-minded visitors and less on bus tours. From the Modern restaurant at New York's Museum of Modern Art (which just earned the James Beard Foundation's Best Wine Service award) to Palettes at the Denver Art Museum to Gertrude's in the Baltimore Museum of Art, there are restaurants where first-growth Bordeaux and great German Rieslings can be found a few feet away from great works of art.

It's a trend that Arthur Manask, a longtime restaurant adviser to cultural institutions like the National Gallery and the Walker Art Center, believes began about 10 years ago with Wolfgang Puck's restaurant in Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art; after that, more museums began to focus on fine dining, he said.

On Wine Blog

[Come for the Art, Not the Wine](#)

Mr. Manask believes that good wine lists showed up at museum restaurants at the same time as good food, but I've only noticed a true upward tick in the past several years. Belinda

Chang, until recently the wine director at the Modern, agrees with this estimation. When she took over as the Modern's wine director four years ago, she said, the list was half its current size of 1,800 selections.

Ms. Chang spent her first few weeks on the job wandering around the museum looking at the art. "My initial thought was to try to link wines to exhibits," Ms. Chang said. Then she realized that the "classic but with a modern streak" wines that she was inclined to include in her list already reflected the sensibility of the museum itself.

These include wines by well-known but ground-breaking producers such as Vilmart in Champagne—one of the first Champagne producers to both ferment and age its wines in oak—and the late Didier Dageaneau, the renegade of Pouilly Fumé in the Loire.

At the Denver Art Museum, Denise Taylor, the owner and wine director of Palettes restaurant, looks at wine labels first. "We have to think about how the wines will look when we set up the bar," she explained. "They have to be sophisticated—not too playful." For example, she said, frogs and ducks were definitely out.

Unlike Ms. Chang, Ms. Taylor does select wines to match the museum's special exhibitions. "We are trying to encapsulate that experience with wine," she explained. "Right now we are featuring three Italian wines that go with our Renaissance exhibit, including a really beautiful Tasca d'Almerita Regaleali rosé from Sicily."

Even ambitious museum restaurants have to consider popular taste. For example, Kendall Jackson Vintners Reserve Chardonnay is the most popular wine on the wine list at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art restaurant—never mind that wine director and general manager Ahmad Farnia's list is 43 pages long (or, as he said, "a good 41 pages longer than just about any other wine list in town").

I was particularly impressed by Mr. Farnia's extensive list of half bottles—they're a good idea for museum goers, who are likely to be eating lunch rather than dinner. (Most museum restaurants are open only one or two nights for dinner, though a few, like the Modern, are open most every night.)

Mr. Farnia also tries to match wines with art. For example, during a recent Egyptian art exhibit he served wines from Darioush, an Iranian-owned winery. "Iran is close to Egypt," Mr. Farnia reasoned. (The winery is actually in Napa, however.)

The museum's current Bible exhibit has him (understandably?) stumped. He couldn't come up with an appropriate pairing. "Maybe a wine from Israel," Mr. Farnia offered, somewhat reluctantly. "Or maybe something really, really old."

It was actually impossible to tell the age of Mr. Farnia's wines as very few were listed with vintages. "People in Oklahoma don't really ask about vintages," said Mr. Farnia. "Maybe three out of 100 people will ask about a particular year." But the years weren't missing on account of vintage-blind Oklahomans but thanks to the state's wine distributors. "They list 2006, 2007 and 2008 vintages for a wine but never tell us which year they're sending; we never know what will show up," he said. I told him I couldn't imagine a New York restaurateur putting up with that kind of service from distributors. Mr. Farnia gave a rueful laugh and agreed.

Meanwhile, at the Getty Museum restaurant in Los Angeles, the wine list's limitations are all self-imposed: Every single wine comes from California. "We're all about local," explained Heather Ogg, the restaurant's manager. "For example, one of our wines, Moraga, is made practically

across the street in Bel Air." Other wines are actually made by Getty family members, i.e., Gordon Getty's Plumpjack Winery in the Napa valley.

I didn't know there were so many types of wines made in Maryland until I read the wine list of Gertrude's in the Baltimore Museum of Art. There were Maryland blush wines, Maryland Chardonnays and Maryland Cabernets, but also an excellent 2009 Pikes Riesling from Australia (\$45) and the solid 2008 AZ Oregon Pinot Noir (\$42)—Gertrude's doesn't have the in-state-only policy of the Getty. For those who dine on Wednesdays after 4 p.m., all wines are half-price, both bottle and glass.

But my favorite museum wine deal by far is the BYO policy of the just-opened Untitled restaurant at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Although the wine list is quite short (10 selections, reasonably priced) and so is the menu (locally sourced), the \$10 corkage fee is the stuff of a wine collector's (and bargain-minded wine journalist's) dreams.

In fact, ever since my first visit to Untitled I've been thinking about what wine to bring upon my return. Should it pair with something in the museum's permanent collection—perhaps a New Mexican sparkling wine for the Georgia O'Keeffes or an austere Austrian Riesling to match the sparseness of Edward Hopper? Or maybe a wine that would capture the spirit of Christo? In that case I could bring almost anything—as long as it was properly wrapped.

OENOFILE

Five Artful Wine Finds (With Retail Prices)

2009 Pojer e Sandri Palai Müller Thurgau delle Dolomiti Art Institute of Chicago, \$17



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

A to Z Pinot Noir 2008; Coudoulet de Beaucastel Cote de Rhone 2009; Szigeti Gruner Veltliner

This wonderfully aromatic, bone-dry white is made by the gifted team of Mario Pojer and Fiorentino Sandri in the Alto Adige region of Italy. It's a lovely aperitif or luncheon wine and is one of several clever selections on the list at the Art Institute's Terza Piano restaurant.

2010 Tasca d'Almerita Regaleali Le Rose

Palettes at the Denver Art Museum, \$13

Denise Taylor, the owner and wine director of Palettes, loves to pair wine with special exhibits. This bright, juicy rosé, from the top Sicilian winery Tasca d'Almerita, is one of her favorites for summer and spring—and the Italian Renaissance.

2009 Coudoulet de Beaucastel Côtes du

Rhône

Oklahoma City Museum of Art, \$38

Although there are few vintages listed on the museum's wine list (see text for details), the 2009 would be the year to enjoy. This richly flavored, spicy red is made by the great Châteauneuf-du-Pape estate Château Beaucastel and is drinking well now.

2008 A-Z Oregon Pinot Noir

Gertrude's at the Baltimore Museum of Art, \$20

There are a number of well-chosen wines on the small list at Gertrude's, including this lively Oregon Pinot from the stellar 2008 vintage. And although it costs \$42 a bottle on the list, on Wednesdays after 4 p.m. it's half-price!

Szigeti Grüner Veltliner Brut

The Modern at MoMA, New York, \$15

Although Grüner Veltliner is the classic grape of Austria, there aren't many sparkling versions available—in this country, at least. But it's just one of the many fun discoveries on the list at the Modern restaurant—clean, bright and snappy with a characteristic Grüner "white pepper" nose.

Correction & Amplification

The chef and restaurateur Wolfgang Puck opened his first museum restaurant in 1999 at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. A previous version of this column incorrectly said a Wolfgang Puck restaurant opened about 10 years ago at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

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