



FOOD & WINE

Get a Taste of This Place

MetroVino prepares to open its doors in Portland's Pearl

By Mark Stock

It's a question Todd Steele's fielded quite a bit recently: How can you open a business right now?

"I haven't been under a rock for the last year," Steele admits between laughter. If anything, the general manager and owner of the soon-to-be Portland restaurant and bottle shop MetroVino has been in the thick of it, before and during the market collapse.

Formerly at AgriVino in Carlton, Steele waged an exhausting and fruitless bout against the OLCC for the use of the Enomatic Wine Preservation System, a sleek metallic device that can keep a bottle pouring fresh for up to a couple of months. In his new headquarters at 11th and Northrup in Portland's ever-expanding Pearl District, the Enomatic rests next to a half-finished bar, cloaked in protective cloth.

This time, however, the machine has found a home. Behind the bar, four wooden cubbies await the European invention, which uses nitrogen or argon gas to prevent bottles from oxidizing and dispenses perfect, programmed pours. The spout self-cleans after every operation. One space is reserved for the Perlage system, a sibling piece of machinery that deals solely with the more pressure-dependent sparkling wines. Steele points to the tremendous flexibility the new technology offers. Whereas most restaurants tout a handful of wines by the glass, MetroVino will offer somewhere around eighty, with little to no waste and without any concern over a bottle going sour after it's been opened. He estimates roughly six or so sparkling wines to be at the ready.

And while the thought of machinery depositing wine into a glass may seem mechanical or impersonal, the device will be hand-operated at MetroVino. Barkeeps will shuffle tastes and glasses to and fro. The card activated system, which caused Steele so much legal grief, has been abandoned. Essentially, it's soda fountain for wine lovers.

Perhaps most attractive, especially amid the gloom of the current economic climate, is the ability to sample of a bottle you could never afford otherwise. Depending on what makes it to print on the final wine list, that 1978 Chateau Latour you've been scheming over at \$500 a bottle could be available by the glass for, say, \$120.

Having labored in wine country, Steele is familiar with the nature of the tasting room. Witness to mishandled wine—like the bottle he saw mysteriously go from full to empty after an alleged and impossible "three glass pours"—Steele knows human error and wouldn't mind remedying it, at least a bit.

Like the paint on the walls, the wine list is still wet to the touch. Steele will undoubtedly incorporate many Oregon wines, especially in the Pinot Noir department. A rough copy of the list reveals a handsome selection from Europe's strongest viticultural nations: France, Italy and Spain. California, Steele's home state, won't be overlooked either.

The bar will also hold a selection of distilled spirits, many from local outfits. "I cannot think of any other area in the U.S., and possibly the world, where there is such a strong concentration of artisan producers of all things fermented," Steele said.

Near the entryway, a tasting stand is under construction. The makings of the bottle shop, this spot will also eventually feature local wineries, pouring on site from behind the counter.

On the plate, MetroVino's offerings will be orchestrated by Executive Chef Gregory Denton. Formerly chef de cuisine at Napa's famed Terra and executive chef at both Maui's Mala Ocean Tavern and Lucier in Portland, Denton brings a barrel full of talent to the kitchen table. Local ingredients will be showcased and the menu quite Northwestern. Just as they share the green and generous Willamette Valley, fare like pork, lamb and salmon will be set alongside a host of complementary wines.

Denton sharpened his craft alongside renowned chef Hiro Sone while in Northern California. The two spent some quality time together at Terra. Owner of San Francisco's Ame and the recipient of a James Beard Foundation Award, Sone crafts in the Asian, Italian and French modes. As a young chef in 1983, Sone trained at the acclaimed Los Angeles restaurant Spago. Having rubbed elbows for some time now, Sone's heavy skill set has rubbed off on Denton.

The streetcar grazes MetroVino's bulbous corner window on Northrup Street, where cranes continue to sway to the tune of new growth. "If I just had foot traffic," Steele imagines, looking ahead at his prospective late April or early May grand opening, "I'd be all right, it's such a captive market." And it is pedestrian, European even, with businesses settling in floor level units and residents occupying everything above.

The Portland psyche is present here, a blend of hipness and sustainability. Steele lists his many interior inclinations: recycled carpeting, zinc paint for sound dampening, sparkling water from the tap of an Italian restaurant appliance (hence, no bottles), a 12-person table made from a walnut tree felled by a storm in wine country.

Steele can barely keep from rattling off the many forward-leaning practices being absorbed by the industry. He talks about wine being poured from kegs to eliminate the energy expended in glass production. He mentions the leaps made in the wine box arena as a means of shipping, light years ahead of the common Franzia-born stigma.

At the moment, the 2,770-square-foot space is littered with paint buckets, plates, unopened packages and the occasional wine glass. A distributor strolls in and hands over a card. A neighbor opens the door for a quick, anticipatory handshake. A few pairs of eyes peer in the windows past the masking paper for a glance at the progress within.

The basic ingredients are all aligned. Come sunshine season in Portland's youngest neighborhood, MetroVino's triple-layered recipe—bar, restaurant, bottle shop—will be served. While uncertainty will always rule the food scene, the wine industry appears to be holding. Meanwhile, Portland stomachs and palates grow increasingly more cultured, thanks to a gastronomy scene that rivals the world's best.

MetroVino's vision will be right at home. ◇

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