

A vine romance: Uncork Sydney wine bars

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SYDNEY, Australia — Fans of Australian wine may be surprised to not find a plethora of wine bars here. But no worries, mate. Well, not quite, according to Judy Sarris, editor of locally published "Gourmet Traveller Wine."

"There are not many bars in Sydney dedicated to wine," she said. "However, there are quite a few good bars that serve a decent 'drop,' along with spirits, cocktails and beer."

There's no doubt about the desig-

nation of One Alfred Street, located in Sydney's liveliest tourist area, Circular Quay. It's a cozy neighborhood wine bar hosted by Belinda and Mark Stapleton for locals and visitors alike.

"We focus on people coming back, whether it's now or in two years' time," Belinda said.

At One Alfred Street, there are more than 30 Australian wines available by the glass and around 140 by the bottle ranging from champagne to after-dinner wines (called "stickies" here) such as Penfolds Grandfather Port. There are flights of wine, too, if you'd like to sample a cluster

of regional wines at \$18.75 for five tasting measures.

Just across the street — a thousand miles away conceptually, but just as rewarding a venue for wine wonks — is the Ember bar. Housed in the glitzy Wildfire waterfront restaurant, it has the best eye-level view of the city's famous Opera House. Ember boasts a 25-page, award-winning wine list with nearly 500 wines by the bottle and 60 by the glass, including 25 classic sherries.

Prices at Ember are reasonable despite its upscale decor of polished red and chocolate Venetian plaster. A bottle of Mountadam Unwooded

Chardonnay from the Barossa, for instance, costs \$29 — and Ember prices wine by the glass at one-fifth of the bottle price (U.S. wine bar proprietors: Please take note).

Rivalling Ember in the glam bar stakes is the Glass Brasserie restaurant at the Hilton Hotel (488 George St.). Designed by New York-based Tony Chi, with a floor-to-ceiling wine wall cellar and three 40-foot-high wine towers, the space reflects the vibrant character of the city. Glass features 36 wines by the glass and more than 300 by the bottle including no less than 20 vintages of Australia's most prestigious shiraz,



HERALD PHOTO BY ANTHONY MANIFOLD

RED ALERT: Belinda Stapleton at the One Alfred Street Wine Bar.

Penfolds Grange.

"We want customers to feel they've gained an experience here," said beverages manager Steven Kirkpatrick.

"We look for unusual wines for the bar that the customer may not have heard of before," added Glass' sommelier, John Clancy. "Maybe something new on the market like Austrian Gruner Veltliner."

At the new De Vine (32 Market St.), you could be in a wine tavern in Vienna. Not surprising because owner/partner Andreas Puhar comes from Austria. With subdued lighting and a welcoming ambience, this recent addition to the Sydney bar scene is not solely dedicated to fine wine. De Vine has a diverse selection ranging from Wachauer riesling to Barossa shiraz and Bandol from Provence; about 60 percent of the wines are European. There are 10 reds and 10 whites by the glass that are changed twice a month; plans are to double that amount.

Puhar also is a wine importer and wholesaler, and this is reflected in De Vine's prices. A glass of Chateau du Poyet Muscadet 2004, for example, is a bargain at \$5.25.

If you'd like to double your pleasure with a panoramic view of buff bodies on Bondi, Australia's best known surfing beach, while you savor a glass, then Icebergs bar (One Notts Ave.) is the place. Icebergs is named after the hardy souls who take to the water at Bondi year-round. Its customers have the softer option of selecting a beverage from 19 table wines by the glass and 230 by the bottle. The place cellars 37 champagnes, too.

There is a large selection of wines in the \$20 to \$30 range and even a Ruffino Orvieto Classico for \$19.

Hemmesphere (252 George St.) is the eponymous bar concept of entrepreneurs Justin and Bettina Hemmes. It's housed in an emporium of food, beverage and luxury hotel areas known as the Establishment. Hemmesphere exudes a Moroccan ambience surrounded with divan seating and furnished with fabric panel walls, leather club chairs and a handwrought iron screen.

"It's not just a bar," said French sommelier Franck Moreau, formerly with Gordon Ramsay in London. "It's something special."

The number of wine varietals by the glass is limited (14). Hemmesphere has inexpensive wines such as Hewitson "Miss Harry" grenache/shiraz/mourvudre for \$7, or if people want to spend more to celebrate, there's Moet & Chandon Brut Imperial at \$19. The choice by the bottle is more extensive (\$66), although 25 percent of the list consists of imported or domestic "sparklers" at \$60 and up.

There's much more to Sydney than meets the eye when it comes to wine bars. You just need to remember that the shingle outside may not tell you what's really going on inside.