wine has been synonymous with the Bay Area since the Russians planted grapes at Fort Ross and the Franciscan fathers planted grapes around the missions up and down the coast of California. Wine and wineries continued to play an important part in the growth of the new state when Agoston Harazthy founded the Buena Vista Winery in 1857 in Sonoma, kicking off the commercial wine industry in California. Many other vintners and wine makers appeared on the scene during the next fifty years, including such notables as Beringer, Gundlach Bundschu, Olivetti, and Beaulieu Vineyards. The 1906 earthquake dealt a huge blow to the beverage industry in San Francisco and the surrounding areas, as many wineries and breweries lost much of their wine as a result.

The next fifty years were spotty, with Prohibition, the Great Depression, and World War II affecting wine sales and the legality of wine itself. During the 1950s and 1960s, the sons and daughters of many of the old wine families in Napa, Sonoma, and Santa Cruz led a resurgence of interest in vintage and high-quality wines. These new vintage wines burst onto the scene in the late 1960s and 1970s, and the public started looking for places to taste these wines. The London Wine Bar answered this need in 1974 by opening its doors on Sansome Street and proudly claiming the title of “America’s First Wine Bar.” Quick on the heels of this opening came the Paris wine tasting in 1976, which brought worldwide recognition to wineries in California.

Since that time, many wineries and wine bars have come to the San Francisco area. With the thirtieth anniversary of the Paris wine tasting happening last year, it’s time to get out and try some of the best wines at some of the best wine bars in the world right here in San Francisco. The range of wine bars varies from the self-serve Enomatic style to the food and wine pairings of Nectar and the tasting menus at Hôtel Biron, District, and the Bubble Lounge.

Which wine bar is right for you, and how do you find one?

Do you want to try California wines or examples of other wines and grapes from around the world? Do you want a restaurant with a wine bar attached or a wine bar that stands on its own? A good first step on this trek is to review the options.

Once you have decided on a wine bar to try, the next step is deciding what to taste when you get there.

Some of the descriptors that you will often see include modern, eclectic, cozy, Italian, elegant, playful, and intimate. As you would for a restaurant, think about the people that you will be with, what you want to do that evening, and the amount you want to spend. A “playful” wine bar is likely to have some interesting wines from around the world that are light on the palette, while an “elegant” wine bar is likely to specialize in rare Bordeaux or Cabernet. “Modern” is going to trend towards newer styles of wines, and “intimate” may speak to the ability to spend quality time with a knowledgeable wine bar owner or sommelier.

Once you have decided on a wine bar to try, the next step is deciding what to taste when you get there. Toward the end of summer, while the days are still hot, trying some of last year’s white or rosé wines would be an excellent place to start. As we move further into fall, we can look forward to the release of Beaujolais Nouveaux and the enjoyment of the darker reds such as Cabernet and
Syrah as the weather changes. If you feel that a challenge is needed, step outside of the normal varietals and look at some of the rarer grapes such as Alvarinho, Alicante Bouschet, Charbono, Cortese, or Tyrian.

THE LAST QUESTION IS HOW TO TASTE THE WINES

Start with a flight of wine so that you can try a small amount of a number of different wines for a reasonable price and then choose one or two to get a glass or bottle of later. When choosing the flight of wine, you can choose one that cuts across different varietals from a geographic region or the same varietals from many regions. Each approach has its benefits, and I recommend you try both.

The thing to remember when you actually start tasting is, “there are two types of wine, those you like, and those you don’t.” Wine tasting is entirely subjective; if everybody had the same palette, there would be only one type of wine. So go out and try these wine bars and others in your neighborhood or around San Francisco. They are a lot of fun; the people working at them love wine and love helping people to find new and interesting wines that they might like.

Eric White is the director of information technology for BASF, regularly teaches wine education in Napa and Sonoma, and is involved with several wine and food nonprofits.

San Francisco Attorney asked several BASF members and staff to assist our readers by writing reviews of their favorite local wine bars. Our thanks to them for accepting this challenge. A special thanks also to Joan Haratani, former BASF president and partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP, and Ralph Latza, Merrill Lynch, who began their reviews but found out before the ink was dry that the wine bars they had visited had closed their doors.

LONDON WINE BAR

Reviewed by Jonathan Bond

In the 1970s, wine bars were all the rage in London as the beer-drinking English discovered the pleasures of ordering and enjoying wine by the glass. Taking a leaf from this book, the London Wine Bar opened its doors in 1974 at 415 Sansome Street. More than thirty years later the first wine bar in the United States is still going strong. The warm, traditional, wood-paneled atmosphere, including a comfortable bar, tables for the gregarious, and high-backed booths for more private conversations, lends to the clubby feeling. Financial District regulars mingle with out-of-towners delighting in one more proof of San Francisco’s level of civilization, and old customers are pleased at how little has changed since their last visit.

Built on the precept of pouring good quality but relatively inexpensive wines by the glass, the focus here has always been on smaller California wineries. The wine list, however, also has a strong sampling of foreign wines, particularly from France, Australia, and Italy. There is a regularly changing weekly list of forty or so wines and a further cellar list of more than two hundred additional wines, sparkling wines, ports, and sheries. These are available at retail or for consumption in the bar. Prices for a glass range from $5 to $10, and the bottles retail mainly in the $20 to $60 range.

Gary Locke, the host and long-time cellar master, will be glad to guide you in your choice of wine and provide tastings before you decide.

The London Wine Bar is open from 11:30 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. daily during the week, and lunch is served from an excellent and ever-changing menu for both light eaters and those with a larger appetite. The menu continues in a reduced form into the evening.

If you like wine, the London Wine Bar is a must to visit and enjoy.

Jonathan Bond is BASF’s chief financial officer.
As you enter A 16, named for Autostrada 16, a road that stretches from Naples to Tavari, you’re greeted by subtle greenery, rich chocolate wood, and a dozen or so coveted high-back chairs situated at the Italian marble bar and bay windows that look out onto Chestnut Street (a great perch for people watching). A colorful floor-to-ceiling chalkboard displays the pride of A 16, its wide selection of wines.

The concept for the establishment was born from a trip to the Campania region of Italy, where co-owner Shelley Lindgren fell in love with the region’s food and wine. Lindgren, local entertainment attorney Victoria Libin, and chef Nate Appleman teamed up to ensure that the grapes complemented the southern Italian cuisine.

The Campania region, dubbed oenetria or land of wine, by the ancient Greeks, has a long history of great wines. First up, Lindgren poured a glass of Clelia Romanino, Fiano di Avellino, 2005—a dry white, with hints of honey, almonds, and evergreen and a smokiness from the still-present volcanic soil of the Mount Vesuvius eruption, which destroyed Pompeii in 79 A.D., literally creating a rich history in the wine itself.

We also tasted the Cantine del Taburno, Falanghina, 2005—a light, crisp, aromatic wine with hints of pear and mango; the Benito Ferrara, Greco di Tufo, 2005, a 70-year-old vine Greco, grown from limestone “Tufaceous” soil, also found in the Loire Valley in Sancerre and Chablis—with rich stone fruits like white peaches, nectarines, and a dry finish; and the I Favati, Taurasi, 2004—red currants, with red fruits like plum and cherry, medium tannins.

A 16’s knowledgeable staff serves forty wines by the glass and half-bottle carafes (assuring that no bottle stays open for too long), predominantly priced between $8 and $14 per glass. The selections change often with some staples of Campania there to stay. Some of the varietals of Campania include Falanghina, Fiano, Greco (whites), Casavecchia, Aglianico, and Piedirosso (red).

Best of all, A 16 is not just a wine bar, it’s also a restaurant—which means you can pair your grape of choice with any of the establishment’s delicious southern Italian dishes while enjoying a wine bar experience.

Joshua Ridless, the Law Offices of Joshua A. Ridless, is a past president of the Barristers Club and a wine novice.
District sits on a stretch of Townsend Street in SOMA that, until a few years ago, could fairly be described as an urban wasteland. Now a thriving and ever-expanding neighborhood, thanks to the new ballpark and a booming South Beach real estate market, this area has become a hub for the urban professional set.

Though only open for a year, District is already one of the area’s prime wining and dining locations. The space is impressive—high ceilings, gorgeous lighting, exposed beams and brick, topped off with artwork by local designers. Continuing the current trend, District has no traditional dining tables, opting for lounge areas and bar seats. As with many new San Francisco venues, the acoustics are poor, making it difficult to hear your friends over the buzz of the crowd and the lounge beats pumping through the sound system. On a recent Thursday, the venue was teeming with people starting at 6 P.M., making it difficult to finish a glass of wine without being “bumped” numerous times. The crowd begins to thin out at about 9 P.M., creating a more loungelike and comfortable atmosphere.

Wine is clearly the focus at District. In fact, you’ll have to go elsewhere if you are looking for mixed drinks, as District only serves wine and beer. The menu offers a diverse selection of more than thirty wines available by the glass, with a more extensive private reserve list available by the bottle. The wines are grouped into logical categories from which you can order a tasting flight to get the full experience.

The offerings are primarily from California, France, and Italy, reflecting the tastes of gregarious Wine Director Caterina Mirabelli, an Italian expatriate, who is always willing to provide a recommendation or a tasting before you select your wine.

The prices range from $7 for a glass of Sartarelli Verdicchio, Marche, Italy, 2004, to $16 for a glass of Pio Cesare Chardonnay, L’Altra, Italy, 2005. The servers are especially helpful in navigating the wine list, which can be overwhelming for nonoenophiles. Overall, the wait staff and the bartenders make the clientele feel welcome.

District also provides a solid dining experience of small plates to go along with your wine choice. Highlights include the artisanal cheese plate ($18), the baby warm spinach salad with balsamic, crispy pancetta, roasted tomatoes and goat cheese ($8), and the spicy Kona kampachi tartare with truffled ponzu and uni sauce ($16).

Aside from wine and food, District is the current hotspot in SOMA for observing (or participating in) the mating rituals of thirty-something professionals. Spill your wine, and you are likely to hit someone who works in law or finance. Spill again, and you’ll hit a couple exchanging phone numbers.

In sum, District is a welcome addition to SOMA. Go for the wine, the food, or the “scene.” While you sip your glass of Italian Sangiovese, wax poetic about how much San Francisco (and in particular, SOMA) has grown and changed over the last decade.

Marcus Wu is senior counsel at Hanson, Bridgett, Marcus, Vlabos & Rudy, LLP. Arman Javid is partner at McQuaid, Bedford & Van Zandt LLP.
Hôtel Biron is known as a restaurant industry hangout. After sampling several wines from its interesting and unusual collection and feasting on one of its tasting plates, we understand why.

Located on Rose Street, Biron is around the corner from Zuni Café and Cav, another good wine bar. But Biron has successfully cut out its own niche. It is cozy and intimate, hip without being precious. In the long front room, there are high and low tables that accommodate different-sized parties, and the smaller rear room is furnished with a comfortable sofa. Interesting paintings for sale by local artists decorate the walls. We were there on a Monday night, and the place was nearly full.

Biron’s wine offerings span the globe—France, Australia/New Zealand/South Africa, Spain/Portugal/Greece, the United States, Italy, Germany/Austria/Hungary, and Argentina/Chile. It lists eighty selections by the bottle and fifty by the glass (with its nine dessert wines coming by the glass only). Bottles range from $24 for a couple of Spanish and Portuguese wines to $150 for a 2000 Soutiran Brut Millésimé Ambonnay Grand Cru. While we tasted only glasses (whites, reds, and a rose), those that we sampled averaged $10 per glass and were below $40 per bottle—in fact, nearly half the bottles on the list fall below that price. Biron also offers more than twenty beers, four sakes (both by the glass and bottle), and a half dozen nonalcoholic beverages—water, juices, teas, and coffee.

If you buy a glass of wine you don’t like, you have only yourself to blame because the very knowledgeable server will offer you a taste prior to purchase, and our server was spot on in matching wines based on descriptions of what we would like to try. The pace was leisurely, and our server spoke fluently both about the wines listed as well as others not on the menu.

Biron does not offer a full food menu, but its cheese and charcuterie selections are delicious. We enjoyed both a slightly sweet, curiously light French triple cream and a pungent Portuguese raw sheep’s milk cheese alongside thickly cut salami. Each item is $5 and comes with a choice of sliced baguette or water crackers. A variety of nuts and fruits come for $2 each.

The next time you find yourself near the Civic Center, we recommend that you stop in for a glass of wine at Hôtel Biron.

Kelly M. Dermody is a BASF board member and a partner at Lieff Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein, LLP. Daniel Burkhardt is the executive director of BASF.