

WINE By Dale Robertson

Sommers look to keep wine lists affordable in 2017

Every January, the New Year rings in with the promise of fun new happenings in Houston's vibrant wine world, and 2017 will be no exception, the price of oil be hanged.

While we wait for word from master sommelier David Keck regarding his next posting and also what longtime Brasserie 19 general manager/wine guy Shawn Virene has up his sleeve, I'm weighing in on a few things I'm certain are going down. Fact is, some of them already have.

Oenophiles know by now that master sommelier Jack Mason has made a triumphant return to Pappas Bros. Steakhouse, and that former Keck sidekick Lindsay Thomas has joined him there, giving the two Pappas locations a true dream team of somms. And the Divino duo, chef/owner Patrick McCray and wine maven Thomas Moësse, are going gangbusters with their new Rice Village-area cave Vinology, which offers sipping, snacking and bottle browsing — featuring some 300 selections — with, of course, the take-away option.

And the transition from Keck, the spiritual force behind Camerata wine bar on Westheimer, to new general manager/wine director Chris Poldoian has been seamless. Although Poldoian is “only” a “Level Two” sommelier and came from the Houston's mainstream wine program, he's ready to flap his wings, expand his horizons and keep pushing the same envelope that Keck routinely did to make Camerata a special destination for wine lovers seeking quirky, sometimes downright geeky offerings from boutique producers and off-the-beaten-path vineyards. Canary Islands, anyone?

Houston couldn't be more



Elizabeth Conley / Houston Chronicle

Rick Jamail, left, and Bill Floyd go over wine for their new high-end Italian restaurant downtown.

fortunate to have a Camerata and Midtown's 13 Celsius — plus, now, Vinology — offering the kinds of innovative programs that put our city in a wine-hipness league with anybody.

Talk to the well-traveled, Tufts-educated Poldoian about his plans and you may imagine a kid in the candy store. But one plan he doesn't have for the near term is to pursue advanced sommelier status, never mind trying to seize the master's brass ring.

“In my situation, I think it's much more important for me to focus only on Camerata for at least the next year,” Poldoian said. “This is such an exciting opportunity. I was given some

latitude to expand what we were doing at Houston's and that only made me want to take even bigger steps. I'm learning something new every day.”

Camerata ain't broke, to be sure, so Poldoian isn't fixing it. The same also could be said of restaurateur Bill Floyd, who will soon be presiding over the long-awaited opening of the two Italian food-and-wine emporiums he's operating in partnership with Astros owner Jim Crane near Minute Maid Park. Houston wine-industry veteran Rick Jamail, whose specialty is Italian producers, is Floyd's sommelier.

Potentente will be high-end, Osso & Kristalla more casual. But they will share something

important in common besides an outdoor patio: A wine list with the same splendidly low markups we've enjoyed at Reef, the Floyd-Bryan Caswell seafood mecca in Midtown. Yes, even white-tablecloth Potente will sell wine at barely more than some high-end supermarkets do. Floyd's prices will be about 1.8 times his cost and, he insists, “That's across the board. It won't be scaled any.”

Which means a \$10 wholesale bottle will sell for \$18 ballpark (pun intended) at Osso & Kristalla and a \$300 single-vineyard Gaja at Potente will cost \$480, or thereabouts. Extreme examples, obviously, but that's the deal. The plan for the former is to have 50 wines at

\$50 or less and the latter to have 150 wines starting at about \$50. But, if you're noshing off the menu from Osso & Kristalla on the patio and simply must have that Gaja, a server will happily go snare a bottle.

Along these same lines, chef Ryan Hildebrand and his enthusiastic young somms, Rick Stiles, have conspired to significantly lower the tariffs on the eclectic list at Trinita on Shepherd. Examples? A half-bottle of Krug “Grande Cuvée” sells for \$72, compared to \$99 retail. The 2010 Mayacamas Cabernet Sauvignon for \$110 (\$85 retail, and I've seen on lists around town for \$300). The Cos Pithos Rosso, a reference-standard Nero D'Avola from Sicily, for \$42 (\$25 retail). I'll also personally vouch for one of Stiles' go-to wines, the Tselepos “Amalia Brut” Moschofilero, a delicious Greek sparkler that sells for \$12 for a glass and \$42 for a bottle.

This is the way of the modern world, and in Houston we have the Clark Cooper Concepts team (Ibiza, Brasserie 19, SaltAir and Coppa) to thank in leading the movement, which means Virene, who spent 15 years as part of their team, is certain to follow suit in his next incarnation. Just as Chris Shepherd and his sidekick somms, Matthew Pridgen, did when they opened Underbelly — and will do again with their second spot, One Fifth, opening up the street on Westheimer this month.

All these guys will tell you that, years ago, Charles Clark and Grant Cooper inspired them to go low, which always translates into a New Year's high for Houston's wine-lovers. Salut, gentlemen.

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Sommelier's pick



Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle

Chris Poldoian recommends a glass of El Maestro Sierra, a 15 Year Oloroso Sherry.

Who: Chris Poldoian, general manager and wine director for Camerata at Paulie's

Background: Having grown up in St. Louis in a family where “wine was always on the table,” Poldoian's first trip to Europe with his parents included a stop in the Burgundy capital of Beaune. He went on to write a food column for the campus paper and a cooking blog while attending Tufts University in Boston. During a year spent studying in Madrid, where he found the wine “to be cheaper than water,” his passion for sherry for sparked. After landing a job with the parent company of the restaurant chain Houston's, he moved to San Francisco, then Dallas, before taking charge of two Houston's restaurants in Bayou City. Poldoian discovered Camerata as a customer, became friends with his predecessor David Keck and, once Keck departed, slipped into the GM role.

What: El Maestro Sierra, 15-year Oloroso Sherry

Why: He points out that Sierra's bodega is located at the crest of Jerez, Spain's highest hills, an outcropping with unique access to the Atlantic's moderating breezes. This cooler temperature in the cellars “gives these wines an ethereal mouthfeel and white-knuckle acidity not found in the lower, hotter parts of Jerez. Matured in barrels for 15 years, this dry (not sweet!) Oloroso pairs well with pork and beef. The wine's spiced qualities from the years in oak make it a wonderful supplement to anything with cumin, pimentón, garlic or a peppery Spanish olive oil. At Camerata, I'd recommend it with a side of our Marcona Almonds or Prosciutto Crisps — fried, razor-thin shavings of prosciutto. The frying concentrates the flavor and saltiness, making it the perfect pairing.” But it's a sherry, he insists, that works nicely with almost anything.

Price: \$15 for a glass, \$51 for a bottle at Camerata, 1834 Westheimer

Dale Robertson

KITCHEN TRICKS

A secret to better pasta? Bake it

By Sara Moulton

If there's anything more comforting than boiled pasta in a sauce, it's got to be baked pasta in a sauce. The baking adds a crispy crust that is such a delicious contrast to the tender goodness of the dish.

The challenge is how to get the pasta to turn out just right. Most baked pasta recipes instruct you to boil the noodles until cooked halfway before baking them. This allows the pasta to finish cooking in the oven as it bathes in the sauce. But this method has challenges. If you boil the noodles more than halfway, they'll be overcooked by the time you pull the finished dish out of the oven. I find it hard to get the precooking time right.

And precooking the pasta, even halfway, takes work and dirties a large pot and colander. Then again, if you don't precook the pasta and instead add it dry to the sauce for baking, it will take much longer to become tender in the oven, even as it absorbs all the liquid in the sauce. Dry pasta needs to hydrate.

So what's a home cook to do? Use my simple no-cook method of precook-

ing the pasta. Just soak the pasta in warm salted water before adding it to the other ingredients and sliding the mixture into the oven. Presoaking is a way to begin hydrating the pasta and washing away some of its starch, even as the salt in the water seasons the pasta.

Yes, you'll dirty a bowl, but given that that's the same vessel in which you'll combine all the dish's ingredients, it's the only bowl you'll need. The soak requires 45 minutes, but it's hands-off time, freeing you to prep the rest of the ingredients. Then it takes no time at all to assemble the dish and pop it into the oven.

Just 20 or so minutes later you can collect your reward: deeply flavored baked pasta, creamy on the bottom and crispy on top. Add a salad and some crusty bread and be happy.

Sara Moulton is host of public television's “Sara's Weeknight Meals.” She was executive chef at Gourmet magazine for nearly 25 years and spent a decade hosting several Food Network shows, including “Cooking Live.” Her latest cookbook is “Home Cooking 101.”



Matthew Mead / Associated Press

Soak, don't parboil, pasta for this baked penne dish.

Baked Penne with Prosciutto and Fontina

Start to finish: 1 hour 15 minutes (20 minutes active)
Makes 6 servings

- 1 pound penne pasta
- Kosher salt
- Butter, for coating the baking pan
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 cup crushed tomatoes
- 1 to 2 teaspoons red pepper flakes, to taste (optional)
- 1½ ounces finely grated Parmesan cheese
- 4 ounces coarsely grated fontina cheese
- 4 ounces thinly sliced prosciutto, chopped

Instructions: In a large bowl, combine the pasta with enough lukewarm, well-salted water to

cover. Let stand for 45 minutes.

Heat the oven to 450 degrees. Lightly butter a shallow baking dish (12-cup capacity with 2- to 2½-inch sides).

Drain the pasta and set aside. In the same bowl, combine remaining ingredients, stirring well. Add the pasta, toss to combine, then season with a pinch of salt.

Transfer the mixture to the prepared baking dish, pressing it down evenly. Bake on the oven's middle shelf until bubbly and browned, 20 to 22 minutes.

Nutrition information per serving: 590 calories, 240 from fat (41 percent of total calories); 27 g fat (15 g saturated; 0.5 g trans fats); 100 mg cholesterol; 1060 mg sodium; 63 g carbohydrate; 3 g fiber; 5 g sugar; 24 g protein.

WINE CALENDAR

2014 (Mostly) Cru Classé Bordeaux

Tasting: The Crystal Ballroom at the Rice, 909 Texas; 4:30-8:30 p.m. Jan. 18; \$80 cash, \$84.21 credit card; 713-854-7855 or coburnsusan2@gmail.com.

Markham Vineyards wine-pairing event:

McCormick & Schmick's, 791 Town and Country; 7-9 p.m. Jan. 19; \$85; 713-465-3685.

Weekly free tastings:

Houston Wine

Merchant, 2646 S. Shepherd; 5:30 p.m. Fridays and 2 p.m. Saturdays; 713-524-3397. French Country Wines, 2433 Bartlett; noon-6 p.m. Saturdays; 713-993-9500. Vino and Vinyl, 3340 FM 1092, Missouri City; 2-4 p.m. Saturdays; 281-208-7453. Vine Wine Room, 12420 Memorial; 3 p.m. Saturdays; 713-463-8463.

Email event information to dale.robertson@chron.com. Please give two weeks' notice.



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