

A NECKLACE OF GRAPES

...being a mostly vertical tasting of three new wine bars ringing Lake Merritt, plus an outlier from Alameda

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY MARK MIDDLEBROOK



Forget “Bottle Shock” and the Paris Tasting. The more pertinent news for East Bay wine lovers is the proliferation of new wine bars, especially around Lake Merritt. The standard blend is this: lots of wines by the glass, a wine-passionate staff, and wine-friendly menus usually focused on small plates. But each wine bar tweaks the blend to create a place with a particular identity—something that’s more or less glossy, fruity, earthy, and elegant.

Following are the results of my comparative tastings, conducted over the summer.

ZZA’S WINE BAR

Vintage: 2007

Appellation: Riviera di Lake Merritt (Grand Ave. sub-zone)

Tasting notes: Elegantly earthy. Opens with understated notes of earth and green olive, the darker tones moderated by a certain warm glow. As it unfolds, wine manager Katie Schoen’s hints of whimsy become evident—a charming idiosyncrasy to the expression that keeps things fresh and lively. Nonetheless, there’s no shortage of sophistication here. Plenty of classic poise, yet with enough eccentricity to interest the jaded palate. Drinking well now, and should continue to improve with age. Note: Those with children or those who want a heartier, simpler experience may

be drawn instead to the “second label” next door: Zza’s Trattoria.

Technical data: 40 wines by the glass or half-glass. Wines from 12 countries, including several lesser-known countries. \$6.50–\$13 per glass. Also beer and cocktails. Rhasaan Fernandez’s Mediterranean menu includes antipasti/small plates, pasta, pizzas, and meat and fish dishes.

Zza’s Wine Bar

550 Grand Ave, Oakland (between Macarthur Blvd and Euclid Ave)
510.839.9124, zzaswinebar.com

VINE WINE BAR

Vintage: 2008

Appellation: Lakeshore Valley

Tasting notes: Big and fruity. Brickish in color, yet retaining a youthful intensity. The flavors here are all California, all the time—boutique-y in a big-boned way. Well made and not lacking in subtlety, but those who like wine that tastes like rocks or dirt should seek elsewhere. On my two tastings, the other tasters around me seemed not to have fully embraced the style here, so maybe this needs some time to develop more fully—or to find its natural appreciators.

Technical data: 40 wines by the glass. Mostly domestic wines, and mostly from boutique California producers. \$6–\$18 per glass. Enomatic machine dispenses measured tastes of more expensive wines. Also beer, saké, and cocktails. Small plates (including salads, sashimi, cheese, and charcuterie) and panini.

Vine Wine Bar

3343 Lakeshore Ave, Oakland
(near Trestle Glen Rd)
510.444.8463

FRANKLIN SQUARE WINE BAR

Vintage: 2007

Appellation: Oakland Classico (Broadway sub-zone)

Tasting notes: Striking blue color, though not to say blue in flavor. The style here is a mix of old world and new world, leaning slightly toward the latter. A solid selection of varieties, with a couple of unusual things in the blend. Artisanal quality is evident, yet the result lacks a certain flair that this taster looks for. I want to re-taste this one over time to see how it develops.

Technical data: 50 wines by the glass, half glass, or carafe. \$7.50–\$30 per glass. Mostly Californian and European. Also beer. Mediterranean-inspired California small plates,



including charcuterie, cheese, salads, and sandwiches.

Franklin Square Wine Bar
2212 Broadway, Oakland
(near Grand Ave)
510.251.0100, fswinebar.com

ALAMEDA WINE CO.

Vintage: 2008

Appellation: Isola di Alameda
(Park Street sub-zone)

Tasting notes: Multi-hued and lustrous color. Stylish yet with a definite sense of place. The flavors are well defined and balanced, and they express a certain tendency toward the unusual. Owner Karen Ulrich's passion is evident from beginning to end—from the focus on everyday value to the artistic packaging. This seems like a good expression of both the island's terroir and Ulrich's personality. A more modest effort than the three Lake Merritt offerings, but none the worse for that. Good value for the money.

Technical data: 30 wines by the glass or half glass. \$4.75–\$10.50 per glass. Also beer, and liqueur- and wine-based cocktails. Bread, cured fish, charcuterie, cheese, and olives.

Alameda Wine Co.
2315 Central Ave, Alameda (near Park St)
510.523.9463, alamedawineco.com

Mark Middlebrook works at Paul Marcus Wines, a retail wine shop in Oakland. Years ago, he lived next to Lake Merritt, but in those days, the lake could boast of neither a necklace of lights or a wine bar.



Food Art & Short Films by Margo Rivera-Weiss



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