

Tribune photo by Bill Hogan
Rows upon rows of bottles of wine, waiting for the attention of wine enthusiasts.

WINE: The upward price spiral has slowed

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net sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay. But there are additional factors.

New sources is one. Courtright speaks of how impressed he has been with recent tastings of imports from the Southern Hemisphere and Spain.

"I've told my purveyors to find something they don't sell to everyone," adds Dan Taylor of Ravinia Bistro in Highland Park. "I try to avoid the best-known wines because they dominate sales. In the bistro tradition, I want to offer wines that are affordable and of good quality, and they have brought me some little gems." Also, a sequence of large harvests that have yielded very good wines has filled the pipeline to overflowing. Even prestige wines previously available only on tight allocation are more widely available now and are being offered with discounts to sweeten negotiations between wholesalers and restaurant wine buyers.

Another factor is the curious consumer. Balter thinks customers are experimenting more and that wine stewards have relaxed and become more approachable. Sommeliers in several restaurants speak with pleasure of the interest their customers are showing in less expensive, "non-traditional" varieties. At The Outpost on Clark Street, owner Kevin O'Donnell says sales of a quartet of "non-traditional" varieties (riesling, gewurztraminer, sauvignon blanc and pinot grigio) have surpassed chardonnay.

"Maybe it's the weather," says Taylor, "but my customers are drinking lots of red wine and eating lots of red meat." Balter's wine sales are "up significantly" after a post 9/11 slowdown. He credits "the element of value" in the Italian Village's massive wine selection. "People haven't stopped eating and drinking in restaurants," he suggests. "But they seem to be much more conscious of whether or not the price of a bottle represents a good buy."

With so much quality wine available, wine professionals say that this search for value may increasingly lead consumers to the by-the-glass section of the wine list. By-the-glass sales can account for an impressive percentage of a restaurant's wine income. At Courtright's it is 70 percent. At Ravinia Bistro the overall figure is over 50 percent and nearly 90 percent during the week. O'Donnell's by-the-glass orders account for 50 percent of the wine poured and 35 percent of wine revenue.

It is not enough, incidentally, to simply compare the price of a glass of a specific wine in various restaurants. The freshness of the wine is a significant factor, as is the amount of the "pour." At Courtright's, with 45 selections, and the Italian Village, with 25, pours are six ounces — which means four to a bottle. A five-ounce pour is more common. While the markups are higher in percentage than those on full bottles, ordering by the glass allows people to limit consumption and everyone at the table to order a wine that best suits his or her food.

Some restaurants are offering a "half-glass" either by itself or as part of a flight of



Tribune photo by John Smierciak
Rebecca and Bill Courtright in the wine cellar of Courtright's in Willow Springs. "If you are a wine enthusiast and are not a happy soul, it's time to see a doctor," Bill Courtright says.

wines intended for comparison tasting. Here are summaries of five wine lists that offer good values:

Italian Village, 71 W Monroe St., 312-332-4040.

This is a 49-page tome that is impressive in its depth and pricing. (About 100 of the wines are priced at \$30 or less while another 100 cost more than \$200.) The management here has been passionately promoting wine for more than half a century, which accounts for the presence of some very mature gems. The list long has been devoted to Italian, French and U.S. wines, but the nationalities represented recently have been broadened. Good value choices: Turn to the 25-item Italy-Red Wine-Veneto page.

Courtright's, 8989 S. Archer Ave., Willow Springs, 708-839-8000.

Everything is right about the list — and the wine storage — at this popular southwest suburban restaurant. The 800-plus entries are arranged by state or country. There are extensive vertical offerings of California cabernet sauvignon, Opus One (14) and Silver Oak (12)

among them, and of Bordeaux, including 11 vintages of Chateau Latour. A broad range of price, with bottles from \$20 to \$900 and glasses from \$5 to \$15.50. Good value despite the three-figure price tags: Robert Mondavi Napa Valley reserve cabernet sauvignon, nine vintages ranging from 1979 (\$220) to 1998 (\$150). Seems steep for good value.

The Outpost, 3438 N. Clark St., 773-244-1166.

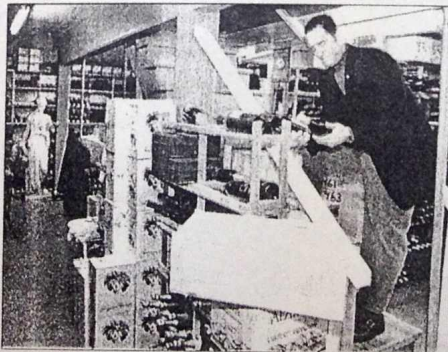
Think Southern Hemisphere when ordering wine in this neighborhood haunt with a decor that suggests journeys by air to far-away places. Australia is the touchstone on a personalized list that owner Kevin O'Donnell changes frequently. You will find as well intriguing selections from Chile, Argentina and South Africa. Wines are listed by varietal or type (French whites, etc.). A vast percentage of the wines are priced under \$40. Good value choices: American pinot noirs.

Va Pensiero, 1566 Oak Ave., Evanston, 847-475-7779.

When in Italy ... drink Italian! That's the theory at this charming restaurant where literal translations of Italian cooking convince diners they have been transported to the Old Country. The 13-page wine list adds to the illusion. It's all Italian except for one page, the last, which is titled "American Interpretations" and which contains 15 wines, such as Malvasia Bianca from Wild Horse in Monterey and Cosentino's "The Neb," a Napa Valley nebbiolo. Listings are by grape type rather than region. While prices are not low, the selection of producers is first-rate. Good value: Chianti Classico Riserva, Badia a Coltibuono from the great 1985 vintage, \$150.

Ravinia Bistro, 581 Roger Williams St., Highland Park, 847-432-1033.

This 65-seat restaurant takes its bistro heritage seriously. On the French page, 14 of 23 wines are priced at less than \$30. "I would love to have an all-French list," says owner Dan Taylor, "but it would rob customers of some options they really like." Currently these options are a quartet of California whites and a dozen reds. His best sellers are (red) Chateau de l'Hospital 1998, a \$29 Bordeaux; and (white) Beaulieu Vineyard 1999, a \$25 Sonoma chardonnay. Good value: Perrin reserve 1998 Cotes du Rhone rouge, \$23.



Tribune photo by John Bartley
Italian Village wine director Ron Balter in the wine cellar at Vivere restaurant. Balter thinks customers are experimenting more and that wine stewards have relaxed and become more approachable.