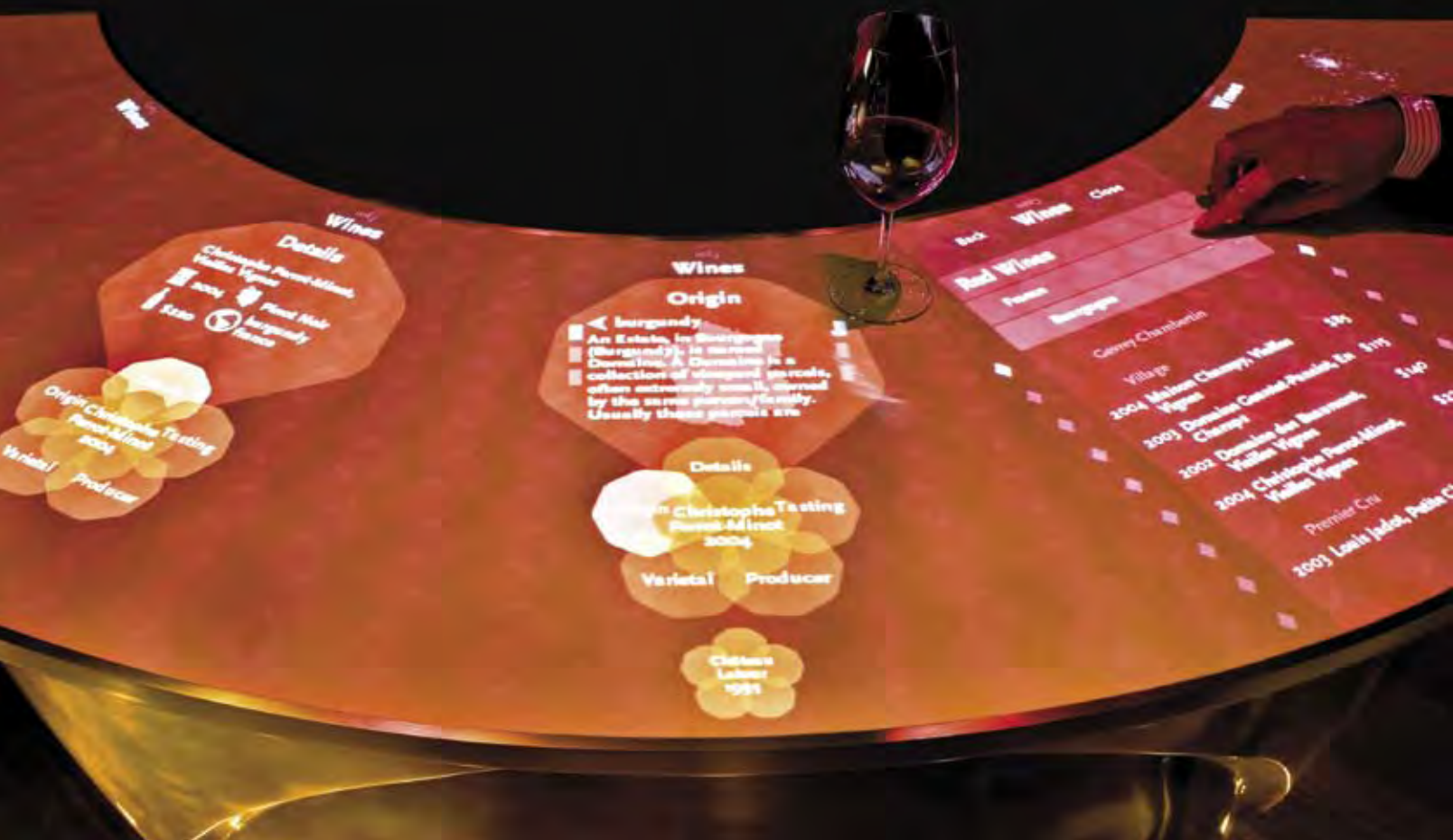


The Wired Wine List



It's Thursday afternoon at the Time Warner Center on New York's Columbus Circle. Up on the fourth floor, where high-end restaurants such as Per Se and Masa reside, tourists and shoppers are starting to circle the wagons, dinner on their minds. They take laps around the floor, inspecting the menus encased behind glass. When they reach the 10-foot-high wall of light boxes that encloses Clo, a tiny, free-standing wine bar in the middle of the area, each one stops, straining mightily to peer inside.



At 3 p.m., an hour to opening time, Clo doesn't look like much. A long, communal table spans most of the space, cluttered with open wine bottles, half-empty glasses, handbags, laptops, and the remains of someone's lunch.

But by 3:30 p.m., the transformation begins: the table is cleared, everything is secreted behind cabinets built into the walls, and the staff wipes down the surface, now identifiable as pristine white Corian. With the visual clutter removed, it's easier to notice that the walls are lined with Enomatic wine-dispensing machines, where customers can self-dispense wine by the glass, Automat style, using prefilled purchase cards. The illuminated slots for the Enomatic cards pulse with light, and the backlit wine bottles glow softly, resembling a quieter version of Atlantic City's slot machines.

3:55 p.m.: Five minutes to opening. The lights are dimmed, and a projector from above is flipped on. Up close, I can see pictures of tiny wine bottles projected on the communal table. Owner Andrew Bradbury shows me how it works: holding one finger above a wine-bottle graphic opens a larger display, revealing the label and information about where the wine was made, the grape varieties, and a few notes on

style and taste. He skims along the tiny pictures, like a pianist running his hand across a keyboard, and the bottles obligingly whisk aside to show another array of tiny bottles.

Is this the future of wine bars and wine lists: everything computerized and automated, from arrival to order? The answer is yes—and no.

When the first high-tech wine list, a wireless, handheld device, hit the market at Aureole Las Vegas back in 2001, it was considered a futuristic novelty, best suited to the theatricality of Sin City. But now, high-end wine bars and casual-dining establishments alike are using technology to draw in customers and help them navigate phonebook-thick wine lists, while aiding the restaurant in tracking and managing inventory.

APPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

As yet, there's no sweeping, end-to-end solution that allows customers to breeze through an electronic wine list, place an order, and pay the bill. But that might not be too far away. According to the National Restaurant Association's 2008 Restaurant Industry Forecast, 74% of consumers between the ages of 25 and 34 said they would be likely to use an electronic payment system at the table. Further, 65% said they would use electronic ordering.

For now, an array of clever, high-tech systems is available to help in certain segments of the wine experience; in particular, "digital wine lists" are gaining traction. At Charlie Palmer's

*Kara Newman is a New York-based wine-and-spirits writer and a member of the American Sommelier Association. Her first book, *Spice and Ice—The Art of Spicy Cocktails*, will be published by Chronicle Books in fall 2009.*



Digital wine lists at Adour (far left) and Clo (left); Clo owner Andrew Bradbury (below).





Aureole Las Vegas, which stores its wine inventory of more than 3,000 bottles in a strategically placed glass tower, waiters bring wireless tablet PCs tableside, encouraging guests to sort through the list, read descriptions of the wines and regions, and create a short list of favorites to discuss when the sommelier returns to the table. Orders are placed through the sommelier. In fact, Aureole is emphatic that the eWinebook technology, as it's called, is not for ordering. Neil Palmer, director of information technology for the Charlie Palmer Group, explains: "If a customer sitting at a table picks a \$20,000 bottle of wine, if it's brought to the table, opened, and the customer says, 'I was just playing with the device, I don't really want that,' that could be a very big mistake."

Meanwhile, New York wine bars Adour (owned by Alain Ducasse) and Clo offer a completely different approach to digital wine lists. Both systems, created by software-development firm Potion Design, allow users to sort through lists of what's available by varietal, region, color, and other characteristics. Neither is used to place an order, although at Clo, guests purchase digital cards to dispense wine from the Enomatic machines—another computer application.

At Seasons 52, a casual-dining chain with outposts in Florida, Atlanta, and New Jersey,



Charlie Palmer Group's Aureole Las Vegas (top); Charlie Palmer at the Joule's eWinebook and Next Vintage wine shop in Dallas (left and below).



Photos courtesy of Aureole (top), Eric Laignel (bottom right)



Next Vintage wine shop in Charlie Palmer at Bloomingdale's South Coast Plaza restaurant, Costa Mesa, Calif.

customers don't get to play with the high-tech gizmos. The wireless handhelds are strictly for the servers, enabling them to look up information about wines, suggested pairings, and food ingredients without leaving the table. Because these handhelds are tied directly into the point-of-sale (POS) system, servers can use them to enter orders—a distinct advantage in an establishment that offers more than 70 wines by the glass. "By the time they get to the bar," says beverage and hospitality director George Miliotes, "the order is ready, because they don't have to go to a separate terminal and punch it in."

WHY GO HIGH-TECH?

Whatever the format, a high-tech system is a competitive differentiator. In addition to facilitating faster list navigation—allowing customers to sort by color or price—it can be a fun way to educate customers about wine and to engage younger, tech-savvy customers.

Another advantage for restaurants is the ability to monitor customer clicks and thus determine what's selling and what isn't. For example, the electronic cards used in Clo's Enomatic machines track which wines are dispensed. Matched against customer demographics, this could prove to be useful information for restaurateurs and winemakers alike.

For establishments that have tied their order-management systems into inventory, like Seasons

52, the high-tech route offers additional benefits. "We run weekly inventories like any good restaurant does," Miliotes says. "You key it into the POS, so we should know what we sell. The POS keeps inventory for us. I would think that every restaurant would want to do that."

Seasons 52 also considers its handheld devices to be valuable tools for staff education. "Wine is a knowledge game," Miliotes says. "If you have confidence in your knowledge, you'll sell more. I love it as a training tool." He also believes the devices have aided in staff retention: "Servers work for pay, but they stay for other things, whether it's the schedule they get or the knowledge they receive."

Sommeliers also note that it's easier to keep wine lists updated on computerized lists, compared to hard-copy versions—there's no need to print new lists daily, and some digital lists can even be updated in real-time, rather than



Enomatic dispensing machines.



Seasons 52 in Orlando, Fla., and beverage and hospitality director George Miliotes.

waiting until the next day. For multi-unit restaurants, wine lists can be updated from single, central locations.

Like any other aspect of a restaurant, digital wine lists provide brand extension, putting a distinctive stamp on the overall experience. The technology behind Adour's and Clo's systems is the same: both were designed by Potion; both project wine lists down from the ceiling and employ motion- and light-sensor technology; both are used for customer education. But the similarities end there. Each list reflects the personality of the establishment, just as a printed wine list would. While Clo's interface is sleek and futuristic, Adour's maintains a more elaborate, baroque appearance.

A customer at Adour, by gently skimming a finger across the surface of the four-seat wine bar, generates what wine director Thomas Combescot calls "sparkles"—tiny, white pinpricks of light that dance across the bar. As with Clo's system, holding a finger above a little wine-bottle icon opens a scrolling wine list. Once a wine is selected, however, a rosette appears with five delicate petals: origin, varietal, details, producer, and tasting notes. As many as four rosettes can open simultaneously for each wine flight.

WHY DO WE NEED SOMMELIERS?

If every restaurant adopted a high-tech wine list, would we still need sommeliers? The answer of everyone interviewed for this article was a resounding yes. Sommeliers still are needed to select, manage, recommend, and serve wines, among other things. But the nature of the job may be evolving.

Clo's Bradbury was also responsible for installing the interactive system at Aureole. "I got pile upon pile of letters from sommeliers saying, 'Thanks for taking away my job,'" he recalls. "It's a layer thing—it doesn't replace the sommelier. I look at it as adding new responsibilities they never had before. Now, it's about what stories do you want to tell? What images do you want to show? We all know winemakers we've met and liked. Now we can tell stories about them."

"It's not meant to replace the sommelier," Palmer says; "it's a quicker way to read the menu."

Adding his voice to the chorus, Miliotes says it's the human element that sells wine: "I want to put the responsibility on my servers and managers to sell the wine, not a computer. I don't want to take the human element out of it. I want to leverage the technology to make my staff as knowledgeable as possible."

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Experts agree that as useful as high-tech wine lists have become, they still have their limitations. When Aureole implemented its attention-grabbing wireless wine list, a primary challenge was ensuring access to a robust wireless network within each restaurant. "It could be a very big disaster if you hand it to your customer and it's not connected to anything," says Palmer.

Another key challenge is ensuring that any



Adour wine director Thomas Combescot in the Wine Library.

system will be user-friendly. “Wine technology has to be simple and not demand a lot of the customer,” Bradbury maintains. “Otherwise, it creates a barrier.”

And Miliotes recognizes that cost is an important factor when considering the impact of a tech-driven wine system. “My advice is look at your costs and what you think you’re going to get out of it,” he counsels. “Technology can be expensive, so you have to balance it out to do what’s appropriate for your restaurant.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

For the Charlie Palmer Group, the wave of the future is expanding the electronic-wine-list concept to retail stores. Next Vintage wine shops, recently opened adjacent to Charlie Palmer restaurants in Dallas and Costa Mesa, Calif., sell the same wines featured in the Aureole restaurants. Each store encourages guests to review the wine list on a 32-inch, touch-screen monitor—“so anyone can come in and peruse the same wines, on a larger screen,” Palmer says.

Bradbury plans to open additional “modular” Clo stores over the next year, both in the United States and internationally. Although he declines to specify where or when (“just say over the next six months”), he hopes to open Clo clones in high-end hotels, cruise ships, and luxury retailers.

For Seasons 52, the next generation will involve supplementing the wine notes posted on servers’ handheld devices with video presentations. To back up the current, DVD-based training, Miliotes plans to add educational podcasts and a Facebook site where servers can learn about wine at their own pace.

But Miliotes cautions that “no amount of technology can help a poorly chosen list. You’ve got to put the same amount of time into finding the wine that’s fabulous and appropriate for your concept. In the end, for the guest, it’s all about enjoying the glass of wine that’s in front of them.”

In fact, the high-tech purveyors all agree that the end goal remains the same: delivering a superior experience to the customer. 🍷