

Dine with fine wine



Steve Dixon/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Wine dinners find a niche in Asheville restaurants

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ASHEVILLE — It's sure not a new idea, serving a great bottle of wine with a memorable meal. But many regional restaurants are really kicking it up a notch with special wine dinners — combining an amazing menu with a superior selection of wines, carefully matched with the food.

The concept seems simple enough. The restaurant plans a special dinner, often with entrees and appetizers they ordinarily don't serve. The food is paired with an equally unique flight of wines, sometimes selected by a distributor or specialty store. The whole affair is built around a theme, like wines of Italy or South America.

But pulling it off requires a lot of preparation, artistry and experience.

"We have people who are driving from Johnson City (Tenn.) or Atlanta for the dinners," said Eric Scheffer, owner of Savoy on Merrimon Avenue. "It's become a cult thing to come to Savoy for a wine dinner."

Savoy has been serving wine dinners for several years, but earlier efforts "lacked presentation" and Scheffer was "still developing my wine list," he said. But when chef Peter Affatato came aboard, it all clicked into place, he said.

Other area restaurants and wine stores have followed a similar path. "We really enjoy doing (wine dinners)," said Eberhard Heide, owner of the Asheville Wine Market, who has arranged these events since opening his Biltmore Avenue store in 1993. "We look for certain venues that allow creativity in the kitchen, then pair them up with the wines. Every one we have done has been a sellout." Lately, Heide has been hold-

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ing wine court at the new Rezaz in Biltmore Village.

Meanwhile, Trevi restaurant, also in Biltmore Village, is winding down a series of popular wine dinners, each focusing on a different region of Italy. Other restaurants known for their wine dinners include the Market Place on Wall Street, the Flying Frog on Haywood Street, Vincenzo's on Market Street and Expressions in Hendersonville.

"It's a good opportunity to showcase the restaurant and the wines," said Gene Hollar of the Wienhaus wine store, which does about two dozen wine dinner events each year.

For Rob Campbell, owner of the Wine Guy store, he actually sees his product consumed and enjoyed. "Otherwise, I just sell somebody a bottle of wine and they go someplace else to drink it," he said. "That's no fun for me. Wine is a communal food and it should be shared."

It's a chance to get really creative in the kitchen, said Mark Rosenstein of the Market Place. "The joining of food and wine is like filmmaking — put one shot against another and the sum of the experience is greater than either of the individual pieces," he said.

And with a multi-course meal and five or six wines, the dinners are bargains, too, said Dwight Butner of Vincenzo's. Depending on the location and the wines, the cost ranges from \$45-\$50 to \$75-\$80, with some premier events priced at \$100 per person.

Sometimes, the planning starts on the wine side — and sometimes, it begins with a chef. "Usually, the region or the type of wines is my choice," said Scheffer. "I'll pick a wine distributor in town and five or six bottles to try. Then Peter and I will spend an afternoon tasting them ... and then I let him (consider) some food pairing ideas. It comes down to trusting each other."

Hollar prefers to let a chef suggest a dining idea. "I would rather work knowing the menu," he said. "Everyone is different."

Heide begins with a dining theme that would work well with wines, then connects with a chef to hammer out a plan. "It's a two-way street," he said.

Wine importer Steve Pignatiello, who has arranged more than 100 wine dinners around the Southeast, sticks exclusively with wines from Bourgogne, France — the region that produces Chablis and those incredible red Burgundies. Those wines just work well with food, he said. "The best of the Burgundies are wines that have the complexity and flavors to complement foods without dominating them," he said.

Vijay Shastri of the Flying Frog has one of Asheville's most varied wine lists at his restaurant. He and wine professional Dylan York founded the Tours des Vins wine tasting club, which has given many tastings with different themes. It's not about making money at the event, but educating the public, Shastri said. "No matter how much technical knowledge a person might have about wine, you need to taste it in order to truly experience it," he said.

Scheffer said the wine dinners have helped boost his business. "The more I educate the public, the more they come back," he said.

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