



SYDNEY UNCORKED

The Harbour City is passing on the pie and stepping away from the schooner. Grape and good food are the focus at this new generation of wine bars, and it looks like the party's only just begun. We'll drink to that.

Words Pat Nourse





Is Sydney a city full of beer-drinkers happy only in pubs? The city's wine bars, packed to the gunwales with young and old extolling the virtues of the red and white with a very Sydney gusto, tell a different story. Sydneysiders can slip from boardies to bespoke in the blink of an eye, and while they like their pies and schooners, they're pretty comfortable with tempranillo and terrines by the same token.

"There's still a tendency to start proceedings the old-fashioned way," says Vini's Andrew Cibej, "but, in a seismic shift, a lot of blokes are drinking rosé now. The Terradora Rosanovae to be precise." Up the road at the Bentley, Nick Hildebrandt reckons the shift away from beery pub culture is clear. "Just look at some of our more fashionable restaurants and bars at the moment," he says. "They all seem to be selling more wine than vodka or Crown Lager, which, in my opinion, is great."

Here at *Gourmet*, we're fans of both the grape and the grain in their many-splendoured forms – what we're celebrating is the opportunity to choose. The promised bar revolution hasn't swamped the city in cracking new wine bars just yet (Small Bar on Erskine Street is getting there, and neighbourhood-focused plans such as those at Glebe's Little Bottle Shop show promise), but for now here are nine that are getting it right.

TIME TO VINO

The small legion of fans Clint Hillary gained as sommelier at several prominent Sydney restaurants and bars was delighted when he and his partners opened this strikingly named little venue in mid-2008. Wine, as the name suggests, is very much the focus, but the food is also of interest. The menu is divided into three brackets: 'Waiting for friends', which includes rabbit and smoked ham rillettes; 'Friends are here', with roast veal with artichoke, watercress and almond salad; and 'Who needs friends?' – desserts such as orange and lemon cake with blood-orange sorbet. Hillary says his mission is to create an ever-changing and intriguing list that's appealing and user-friendly for the wine buff and the wine novice alike.

How was the list put together?

"I really feel I have it easy," says Hillary. "I look for wines that interest me and stimulate some thought. The easy part is that I change the list daily so I can listen to my customers and tweak the list as I please."

What are you loving to pour right now?

"The Portuguese loureiro, a white wine in the vinho verde style: lemon-sherbet at first, with vibrant acidity and savoury notes to make it interesting. Red-wise, it would have to be a primitivo from Torrenvento in the south of Italy. It's such a good-value, medium-weight wine with bucket-loads of complexity and it's very food-versatile."

Which wines would you be racing to save in a fire?
"Anything from Italy and, most of all, any fragrant high-acidity whites: I'm an acid freak."

Where are the real bargains on your list?

"Bargains in my list are found in a couple of spots, apéritifs and digestifs being one, but definitely in the



back, where we offer some unusual crackers by the bottle – one being the non-vintage red called Le petit vin d'Avril, which is produced by the famous Clos de Papes house. It's a goal of mine for people to experience something new and different. There's no better feeling for me than when I see a customer have one of those wine light-bulb moments, when you know they'll remember that wine for a long time to come."

Your solid-gold marriage of menu and wine list is...

"Manzanilla sherry and freshly shucked virgin Pacific oysters, without a shadow of a doubt. That's what I have, anyway."

66 Stanley St, Darlinghurst, (02) 9380 4252



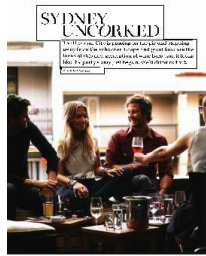
BENTLEY RESTAURANT & BAR

If your idea of the wine bar is all deep upholstery, scrawled, gilt-framed mirrors and vintage wine paraphernalia, Bentley might just make you dizzy. Chen Lu, the same designer responsible for Billy Kwong's décor, deployed chipboard cut-outs, Eames print fabrics and gallons of glossy carmine paint to transform this former loose-boozer into a two-star restaurant to be reckoned with. The kitchen comes out swinging, too. Whether it's chorizo wrapped in crisp fried potato served at the bar with a tiny toothpaste-tube of harissa, or seared tuna with red-pepper jelly and Ortiz anchovies at the table, this is edgy, new-wave Modern Australian with a pronounced molecular bent. Tying the whole package together is Nick Hildebrandt's kooky and elegant wine list.

How was the list put together?

"We try and represent good smaller producers whose wines are individual and have a certain degree of edge-

Bending the rules
Nick Hildebrandt (above) has created a kooky and elegant wine list at Bentley Restaurant & Bar (top). Good times and good wines at Time to Vino (opposite).



A towering figure in the Australian restaurant scene, Tony Bilson also knows his way around a bottle of wine.

to them," says Hildebrandt. "We look for wines that really stand out from the pack. In addition, we try to educate our clientele by introducing them to new wines. The list is based on structure and balance. We source our wines through various channels including distributors, importers, auctions, private cellars and direct from the vineyard. We're also importing directly from Europe."

What are you loving to pour right now?

"Our Champagne: the Serge Mathieu, which we import directly, is especially good. It has more layers of complexity than the bigger houses we generally see here in Australia. I'm also proud to pour the R Wines Gippsland gamay made by rising superstar winemaker William Downie. We were lucky enough to secure the Australian allocation exclusively for Bentley. It's bottled without any sulphur and reminds me of the small, artisan-style Beaujolais wines, which are gaining popularity."

Which wines would you be racing to save in a fire?

"The wines that are really rare. Burgundy from Emmanuel Rouget, Claude Dugat and Prieure Roch or perhaps our vertical collection from Champagne-god Jacques Selosse and another rising superstar, Diebolt-Vallois. These are the wines that make our list what it is."

Where are the real bargains on your list?

"The bargains are in the wines we've sourced directly, whether locally or from Europe. Obviously, the ones we import don't carry the middleman margin that makes these wines expensive in restaurants. We also work on a lower margin for our premium wines."

Your solid-gold marriage of menu and wine list is...

"On our tasting menu we match Brent's black sesame and pea fondant with cult Loire Valley producer Clos du Tue-Boeuf's Touraine Blanc. It's one of those matches that works on so many levels."

*Cnr Crown & Campbell Sts, Surry Hills,
(02) 9332 2344*

Vino in the city
The young and the beautiful gather at Time to Vino (above) to enjoy an ever-changing wine list and a menu to match.

TONY BILSON'S NUMBER ONE WINE BAR

In addition to being one of the grand figures in Australian restaurants, Tony Bilson knows his way around a bottle of wine, and Number One sees him putting that knowledge to good use in an informal space just below street level at Circular Quay. The list here, he says, showcases some artisanal producers and features styles of wines that "sit softly in the glass". "No histrionics. No American oak," says Bilson. "Except for Grange. And even then I prefer the St Henri or the RWT." Bilson has installed chef Miguel Maestre in the kitchen to turn out wine-friendly dishes in the French and Spanish mode: think duck parfait with grilled brioche; pork rillettes; bacalau, endive and sorrel salad; grilled stuffed pig's trotters.

How was the list put together?

"Putting the hard word on mates and raiding our personal cellar."

What are you loving to pour right now?

"Entry level: King Valley Merlot 2004. Top: Penfolds Coonawarra Cab-Sav/Shiraz 1967."

Which wines would you be racing to save in a fire?

"Sorry, I can't answer. The others would be hurt if I didn't mention them and I love them all."

Where are the real bargains on your list?

"At the top end, for sure, but you have to say that Australian rieslings are the most undervalued wines in the market."

Your solid-gold marriage of menu and wine list is...

"Lerida Estate Lake George Pinot Noir 2005 with confit of Barbary duck."

1 Alfred St, Circular Quay, (02) 8252 9296

ASH STREET CELLAR

The elegant achiever at the exuberant Ivy complex, Ash Street puts a cosmopolitan face on the local wine bar concept with boulevard-style densely packed lane-way seating, Lauren Murdoch's resourceful, restrained modern Med menu and Franck Moreau's far-reaching wine list.

How was the list put together?

"I'm very much interested in boutique wineries around the world," says Moreau. "I prefer to focus on wines that are both interesting and unusual, while offering the customer great value for money."

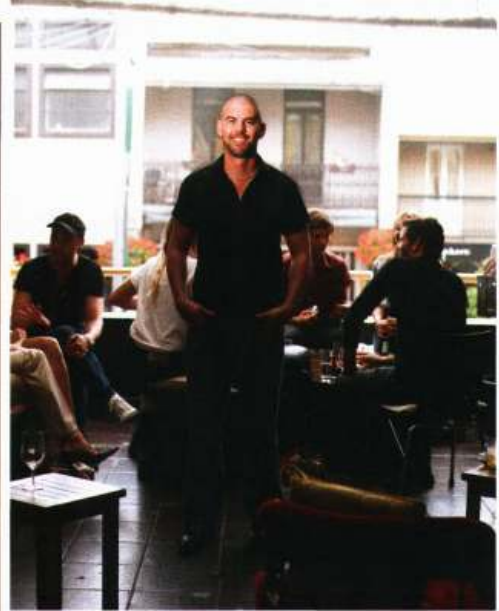
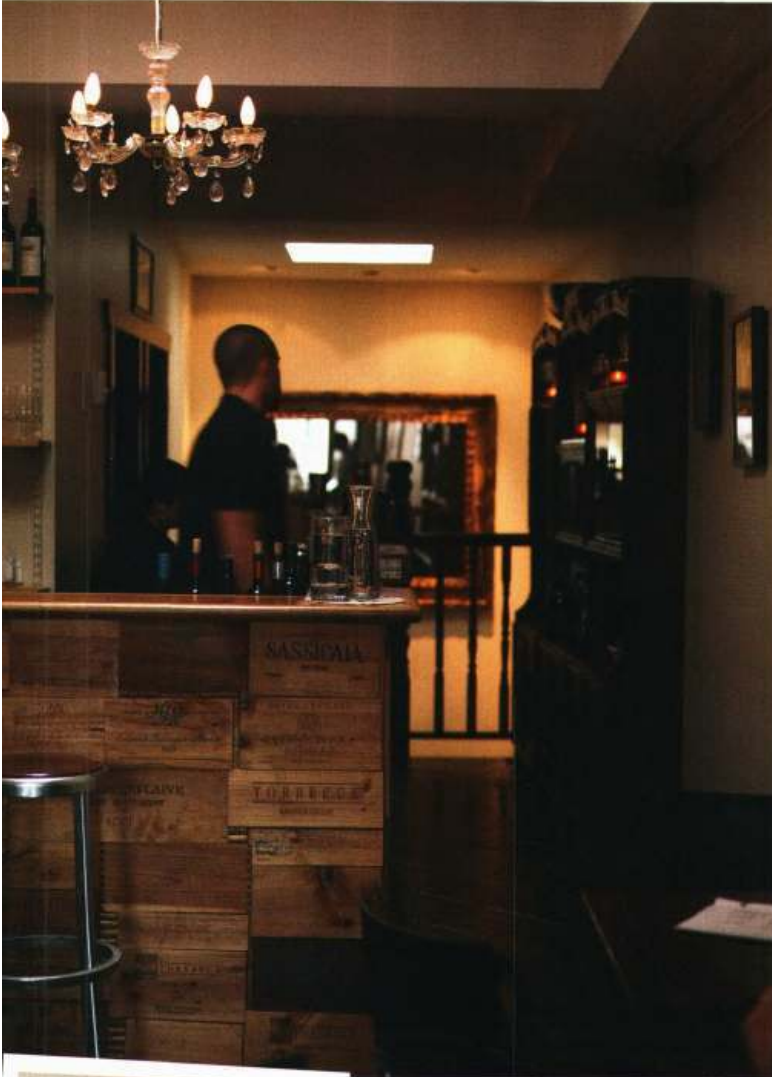
What are you loving to pour right now?

"I'm delighted with a Brazilian cabernet, 2006 Miolo Quinta do Seival Cabernet Sauvignon from Rio Grande do Sul, at \$12 per glass. I'm also pleased with the 2006 Anita Nittnaus Hans Blaufränkisch from Burgenland, an Austrian red wine, which is \$15 a glass."

Which wines would you be racing to save in a fire?

"I'm particularly proud of the 1996 'S' de Salon Blanc de Blancs, and the 2000 Leroy Meursault Burgundy. I think the 2001 Marquis d'Angerville Volnay 1er Cru Champans is also a standout."

Where are the real bargains on your list?>



Raising the bar
 Clint Hillary (top right) from Time to Vino (top left) and Tony Bilson (far left) from Number One Wine Bar (above). The stylish surrounds of Ivy's Ash Street Cellar (left, centre) and its mod Med chorizo and artichokes (left).



WINE ODYSSEY AUSTRALIA

A flash new concept for Sydney, Wine Odyssey uses an automated Enomatic wine tasting system to offer 44 wines by the 25ml taste, 75ml half-glass or 150ml full glass. Grange – currently the 1997 – is among the selections, clocking in at about the dollar-per-mil mark. “I’ve got a wine list with 120 wines on it and a retail store with 300 wines, so I can change the selection of wines by the glass we offer on the machine within minutes,” says sommelier Donna Freeman, late of The Boathouse on Blackwattle Bay. “We always have a flight of sparkling, one of dessert and one of red wine – three dishes and three 50ml pours to go with them.” The main Wine Journey Room tasting area is augmented by a tasting theatre and an ‘aroma room’ where you can sharpen your knowledge of Australian wine. The cellar is all-Australian, with an emphasis on small, independent and lesser-known producers alongside the nation’s most famous labels. Craigow riesling and gewürztraminer from Cambridge in Tasmania, Orange’s Printhe Wines, Optimiste petit verdot from Mudgee on the one hand and Leeuwin Estate Art Series chardonnay, Chambers muscat and Bass Phillip pinot on the other.”

How was the list put together?

“We looked at the key Australian winemaking regions first – riesling from the Clare, Barossa shiraz and so on,” says Freeman, “but after that I was interested in showing just how many different styles and grapes the Australian landscape supports – the Freeman rondinella corvina, for example. The response has been great and surprisingly enough, perhaps, it’s not just tourists. There are a lot of Sydney business people who just come in for a glass of wine before they get on their ferry and try a few things. We have a membership program now, and a lot of return customers.”

What are you loving to pour right now?

“I’ve got Ulithorne sparkling shiraz on there, from McLaren Vale, and I think it’s one of the best sparkling shirazes I’ve tried, but it’s quite polarising. The other thing I like about Wine Odyssey is that the wine comes first, so we’ve got our fantastic chef, Mark Beattie, and if I want a wine, I get it, and it’s up to him to make a dish to match it, which is a great turnaround after all these years.”



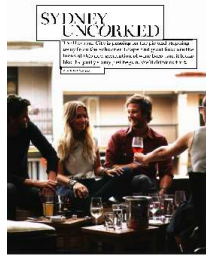
Journey to remember
Wine-lovers are spoilt for choice at Wine Odyssey (above) with a by-the-glass wine-tasting system. What Bondi’s Shop and Wine Bar lacks in size and gadgetry it makes up for in charm (opposite).

“There is a particularly good sparkling vouvray, which is produced by Château Moncontour in the Loire Valley (\$70). It’s dry with a good texture and fine bead. For an alternative to sauvignon blanc, try the 2007 Rusden Christian Chenin Blanc from the Barossa. It’s a dry-style white with some fruit and a crisp finish. In the reds, the 2004 Stonecroft Serine Syrah from Hawkes Bay in New Zealand reminds me of a nice Rhône Valley wine. Loire Valley red wines can also offer the buyer great value for money, although they can at times be misunderstood. I would recommend the 2005 Philippe Alliet Chinon Vieilles Vignes; it’s \$110.”

Your solid-gold marriage of menu and wine list is...

“For an afternoon break, it would have to be the cured meat selection with a glass of 2007 Descendientes de J Palacios Pétalos from Bierzo, Spain, but I think my favourite is the salt and chilli school prawns with aioli accompanied by a glass of 2007 Yves Cuilleron VdP des Collines Rhodanienne marsanne from the Rhône Valley.”

1 Ash St, Sydney, (02) 9240 3000



Where are the real bargains on your list?

"The wines from Craigow, the 2003 Riesling and the 2005 Gewürztraminer, definitely. And also the 2006 Salomon Syrah Viognier from the Fleurieu Peninsula – I think that's really good value for money. I like to find European winemakers to show how they're using Australian grapes to make wines in a French-influenced style, say, or a Spanish-influenced style. That Salomon is definitely not a typical Fleurieu wine, for instance. It goes to show that sometimes it's about more than just terroir."

Your solid-gold marriage of menu and wine list is...

"The Optimiste petit verdot with the chargrilled lamb fillet with lentil dhal and infused curry jus. It's bigger than an amuse but smaller than an entrée, and every person who has tried that match in the red wine flight has said: "That's the one."

*Cnr Harrington & Argyle Sts,
The Rocks, 1300 136 498*

MILLE VINI

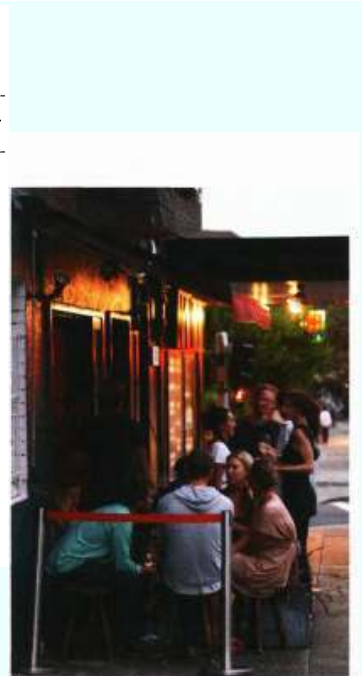
After a drawn-out opening in 2008, Mille Vini has parlayed its Crown Street address, hefty wine list and swag of Italian attitude into a perpetually buzzy upmarket boozier from the same people behind Pizza e Birra. Simple antipasti and stuzzichini complement a Europe-leaning list decorated with saucy satyrs and other intriguing etchings. "We've refocused as a team by introducing more obscure styles and upcoming wineries from both the Old and New Worlds," says sommelier Guy Vaillant.

How was the list put together?

"We recognise that our clientele are real food and wine appreciators," says Vaillant. "They're eager to try new things and learn about wine. That's why we have introduced lesser-known grapes such as greco, vermentino, albariño, negroamaro and monastrelle."

What are you loving to pour right now?

"Tscharke Girl Talk albariño, Tapestry Cadenza old-vine grenache and Don David tannat.">



The Shop and Wine Bar, a flock-walled hotbox, sells espresso by day and sates the vinous needs of a local Bondi clientele by night.

THE SHOP AND WINE BAR

Yes, this definitely redefines 'bijou'. But what The Shop lacks in size, it makes up for in charm. This flock-walled hotbox sells espresso by day and sates the vinous needs of a very local Bondi clientele by night. Owner Anthony Kaplan presides over a short-but-sweet list and a modest menu that suits this smallest of Sydney wine bars, far from the madding Campbell Parade crowd, down to the ground.

How was the list put together?

"The list is all about balance," says Kaplan. "It's about variety, region and price. I've tried to include as many different varieties as possible from regions around the world, while keeping within a certain price point – glasses between \$8 and \$12, bottles between \$30 and \$90. I read publications regarding wines, go to plenty of tastings and, most importantly, rely on customers' feedback."

What are you loving to pour right now?

"The 2008 Mesh Riesling and Scorpo Pinot Gris, the 2006 Magpie Estate The Fakir Grenache and Murray Street Barossa Shiraz 2005."

Which wines would you be racing to save in a fire?

"I'm also especially proud of some 2006 Tassie pinots, Spring Vale and Winsted among them. In the event of a fire, always protect the Champagne!"

Where are the real bargains on your list?

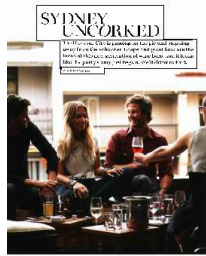
"The Ayala NV Champagne, 2007 Twofold Riesling, 2006 Philip Shaw Chardonnay, 2006 Poderi Colla Dolcetto and 2004 Dominique Portet Heathcote Cabernet."

Your solid-gold marriage of menu and wine list is...

"Antipasti, charcuterie and cheese are perfect wine food, naturally. Personally, I can never go past a late-harvest riesling and a cheese plate."

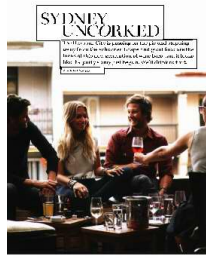
78 Curlewis St, Bondi, (02) 9365 2600





The writing on the wall
 Savvy Sydneysiders
 flock to Vini for its
 small-bar feel and
 equally small enoteca
 prices. Aperitif (top
 right) has an all-
 European wine list
 selected by sommelier
 Charles Leong (right).





Which wines would you be racing to save in a fire?
I'd drench myself with wine to face the fire, but would definitely be saving some of my favourites – such as the Château Pichon-Longueville and Querciabella Camartina Super Tuscan."

Where are the real bargains on your list?

The bargains are the Old World grenaches, the whites and the red varietals, as well as a pocket of unknown smaller Australian wines in the shiraz section. Beautiful wines at a good price."

Your solid-gold marriage of menu and wine list is...

"The Castelluccio Balio di Zola sangiovese with the lamb cutlet with rosemary potatoes and the rabbit tagliatelle with Don David tannat."

397 Crown St, Surry Hills, (02) 9357 3366

VINI

Despite tripling in size since it opened in 2005, this Italian-focused hot spot has never lost its small-bar feel, and continues to keep it real with everyday enoteca pricing on its food and a refreshingly personal approach to wine. The list is all-Italian, notes owner/chef Andrew Cibej, with a couple of locally produced Italian varietals.

How was the list put together?

"We really try to represent Italy's regional and varietal diversity," says Cibej. "We've got wines from 16 regions and about 40 grape varieties."

What are you loving to pour right now?

"Gomba Barolo 2003, the Cos Cerasuolo di Vittoria 2006 and the Tasca d'Almerita Regaleali Bianco 2006."

Which wines would you be racing to save in a fire?

"Nino Negri Inferno! But seriously, 1997 and 2001 Barbaresco by Produttori del Barbaresco. Any 2004 Barolo or Barbaresco and the Pieropan la Rocca 2006."

Where are the real bargains on your list?

"The Migliori list, with its good-value big hitters, the house pinot grigio and the Marcarini Barbera d'Alba 2006."

Your solid-gold marriage of menu and wine list is...

"Ricotta panna cotta and Vigna del Papa vin santo; chocolate fig hazelnut tart and Cesari Recioto di Valpolicella; or squid-ink tonnarelli with blue swimmer crab and chilli with 2006 Cantele Alticelli fiano."

3/118 Devonshire St (enter via Holt St),

Surry Hills, (02) 9698 5131

APERITIF

With a speak-easy vibe, tucked away under a vast Moreton Bay fig on colourful (ahem) Kellett Street, Aperitif is one of the better-kept secrets of the wine-savvy world. Its selection of namesake pre-dinner drinks is hard to beat, its late-late opening hours have made it a hit with off-duty sommeliers from other restaurants, and the shared-plate menu of mostly French and North African dishes is a drawcard in itself. But the focus is ultimately the wine. Smiling sommelier Charles Leong, whom you may remember from MG Garage, has put together an all-European

(and mostly French) list that nails the name-regions while keeping pace with the up-and-comers.

How was the list put together?

Instinct," says Leong.

What are you loving to pour right now?

Definitely the 2005 Cordier Aux Bois d'Allier Mâcon Chardonnay."

Which wines would you be racing to save in a fire?

I think the 2003 Armand Rousseau Clos de la Roche Grand Cru."

Where are the real bargains on your list?

Everywhere."

Your solid-gold marriage of menu and wine list is...

Nardín anchovies with Échiré butter and grilled bread with Sánchez Romate Marismeño fino sherry."

*7 Kellett St, Kings Cross, (02) 9357 4729.**

ANOTHER ROUND: SIX MORE WINNING WINE BARS

Bambini Wine Room

This extension of the media and business hang-out Bambini Trust Café is richly decorated in neo-Old World finery. The Italian-leaning list and short-but-sweet bar snack selection has it packed with devotees. *185 Elizabeth St, Sydney, (02) 9283 7098*

Gazebo Wine Garden

With sub-headings such as 'Mysterious', 'Slurpable' and 'Unpronounceable' on the wine list, it's clear the décor isn't the only thing done tongue-in-cheek here. Whimsy aside, the cellar is diverse and every bottle is offered by the glass and 300ml carafe. *2 Elizabeth Bay Rd, Elizabeth Bay, (02) 9357 5333*

DeVine

Andreas Puhar has assembled one of Sydney's most impressive lists, and presents it in a very approachable city-centre location. With Trumer Pils on tap to boot, it's a favourite of wine-industry insiders. *30 Market St (cnr Clarence St), Sydney, (02) 9262 6906*

Small Bar

The first establishment to trade officially under one of the state's new small-bar licences, this narrow terrace operation's wine list is still a work in progress, comparatively speaking, but it's a positive indication of things to come. *68a Erskine St, Sydney, (02) 9279 4369*

Delicado

Respected sommelier Ben Moehtar opened this dine/drink space to pay respect to his twin passions: fine wine and Spanish culinary culture. *134 Blues Point Rd, McMahons Point, (02) 9955 9399*

Fix St James

We're loving this hidden gem more than ever, with food from ex-Glebe Point Diner chef Sam Bennett and a punchy wine selection. *111 Elizabeth St, Sydney, (02) 9232 2767*

