

# Los Angeles Times

## Want to throw a great wine party? See how top L.A. sommeliers do it

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It's a comforting ritual for many Angelenos — a gathering with friends who share a bottle of wine and partake of the camaraderie that sustains them

during the workweek. The details of what we're drinking are less important than the intimacy and an opportunity to relax.

There are, of course, a small number of such gatherings that add another component — education — into the mix, experts for whom wine isn't just an excuse to get together. It's the reason they convene once a month, migrating from home to home. To talk about wine, exchange information about wine and, yes, to drink wine too.

Welcome to one of L.A.'s little-known, completely ad hoc wine societies, a small group of women who are sommeliers and beverage directors at some of the city's top restaurants.

"The idea here is to be educational but also fun," says Taylor Grant, wine director for Venice's Scopa restaurant. "We like to share our experiences with wine and see what's going on in different parts of the city. I find that what people are drinking in Venice is different than what they want in Mid-City or in downtown L.A. This gives us a chance to check in and talk about all of that."

It may sound like the perfect setting for some quaffing snobbery, but that's far from the case for this group, all of whom are younger than 35. "We're not as picky for our own personal use as we have to be at our restaurants," says Elizabeth Huettinger, host of a recent get-together at the recently opened Otium restaurant (where she is the wine director), located next to the Broad museum in downtown Los Angeles. "We're all in this wine community, so we're privy to what people are drinking. We like to talk about that, as well as discover new wines."

Discovery is something built into the design of the meet-ups. For each get-together, everyone brings her own viticultural obsession of the moment, often brown-bagged for a blind-taste experience. For Maria Garcia, head sommelier at Republique, the pick of the day was an Austrian Riesling. "This is one that

hasn't been released to the public yet, so I really wanted to share it with everyone."

Marin Preske, sommelier at downtown's Terroni, opted for a Nebbiolo from Piedmont Bramaterra because "I love it and these are the people I want to drink it with."

The meetings migrate from one person's residence to another, but Huettinger's home in the newly completed Emerson building in downtown L.A. is arguably the heart of the group and is where most of the gatherings happen. "My apartment is too small, but we either meet near the pool or up here on the penthouse. For me that means there is essentially zero prep work," she says of the rental building's Marmol Radziner-designed common areas.

"A lot of wine people happen to live here too," says the 30-year-old, referring to building mates such as Michael Shearin, formerly of Celestino Drago and now manager for Golden State Wine Co., and master sommelier Christopher Miller, beverage director at Spago Beverly Hills.

"I actually think up here in the penthouse is more comfortable for us," says Sarah Clarke, who brought a magnum of white wine and is the beverage director for the Mozza Restaurant Group. "We're not cramped in someone's kitchen. We don't have to feel like we're putting anyone out, and we can just do our thing. We're a small world interconnected by wine, and when we get together, I think of it as guerrilla-style wine tasting."

All of which makes for a grand afternoon and evening — but what's the take-away for the rest of us who might not be as knowledgeable about wine or the art of casual parties? Check out our sidebar with a few tips from our experts.

### **Who attended the sommelier get-together?**

Elizabeth Huettinger: wine director at Otium

Maria Garcia: head sommelier at Republique

Taylor Grant: wine director at Scopa

Marin Preske: sommelier at Teronni

Kate Green: assistant to Nancy Silverton, Mozza

Sarah Clarke: beverage director at Mozza

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### **Tips for hosting a wine party**



Maria Garcia, sommelier at Republique, left, pours Champagne as Hope Shiverick, center, L.A. district manager at the Henry Wine Group, looks on. (Christina House / For The Times)

Think a wine-tasting party sounds like fun? Here are a few words of wisdom from Otium wine director Elizabeth Huettinger:

1. To keep trips back and forth from her apartment to a minimum, Huettinger bought a "bar cart" on Craigslist for \$150. "It's an old credenza or a mini buffet that someone added wheels to before we bought it," she says. "All the tools and glasses go inside, then the wine goes on top and I just roll it to the elevator and out to the pool or penthouse, depending on where the party is. That way I can actually hang out instead of constantly running back for supplies."

2. To keep it simple, Huettinger offers just one wine glass per guest and opts for a burgundy glass for all wines because it's the "most expressive for flavors," she says. "If a wine is really bad, we'll pour in the next wine and rinse it out. We always rinse with wine."

3. She opts to entertain in her building's penthouse or pool areas since her one-bedroom isn't big enough for her group. But she personalizes the spaces with simple hacks: She talks to management about music beforehand. "I can't bring my own CDs, but I can ask them to play something other than smooth jazz." She also occasionally invites her dogs to the party. "They're on leashes when I have them out here, but they make things feel more like home."

4. All the sommeliers who gathered for this party agreed on at least one thing: Skip the supermarket when shopping for wine. "Wine buying is like making a bet," Huettinger says, "and if you have a knowledgeable person to help you eliminate risk, it's very much worth it. The people at Wally's and K&L, for example, can easily translate what you want and your budget into the perfect wine."

5. "If you are all alone, know nothing, and in a rush, the old adage goes, 'What grows together, goes together,' meaning if you are serving Italian food, Italian wine will likely work," Huettinger advises. "It's not a perfect 100% rule, but it works for an under-the-gun novice."

<http://www.latimes.com/home/la-hm-sommelier-20151205-story.html>