

# summer sipping



L TO R: Champagne flight offers a bubbly taste of three regions and grape varieties.

Cork's sleek bar interior matches the sophisticated wine list.



## Cooling off at DC Wine Bars

BY CELESTE MCCALL, PHOTOS BY ANDREW LIGHTMAN

Summertime, and the sipping is easy. But even hotter than Washington's famously sultry August is our plethora of wine bars. From these trendy, grape-infused watering holes (which also serve innovative food), we decided to cool off at three relative newcomers, each situated in a different neighborhood.

### CORK

In stark contrast to the sleekly-modern Proof is Logan Circle's rustic, homey Cork, the creation of Logan Circle residents Diane Gross and Khalid Pitts. The converted townhouse lends a neighborhood feeling; wine sippers at the L-shaped bar seem to know each other. Walls are exposed brick; floors are wooden; ceiling is pressed tin. The wine cellar was open, allowing diners to gawk at endless rows of bottles. There's more to Cork's interior than I thought. Seeking the restroom, I wandered down a long corridor which led to dark dining nooks and finally, the bus-

ting kitchen in back.

Considering recent publicity surrounding Cork (voted best new restaurant by the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington), I expected a wait, but was seated immediately at the bar while waiting for Peter to join me before getting a table.

When the busy bartender handed me the spiral wine list, I saw that Cork offers at least 50 wines by the glass and 160 bottles from small producers around the globe. Selections were exclusively European, with emphasis on France and Italy. Since I was still in that summery rosé mood, I decided on La Valentina Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, a beautiful deep pink, crisp and refreshing. (The bartender let me taste it before deciding.)

While perusing the tapas menu, I nibbled on a \$4 dish of house-cured mixed olives, scooped from a huge jar right on the bar. When Peter arrived, we opted for an outside table. There, we encountered neighbors on their way to the Source Theater, and they joined us for a glass of wine. We could have ordered a "flight," allowing us to explore three different regions and varietals.

As Peter sipped his Floria vin de pays Cote de Gascogne (nice dry white from Gascony), we perused executive chef Ronald Tanaka's "small plates" menu, which offers suggestions for food and wine pairings. We chose a generous plate of fried calamari with tarragon-spiked tartar sauce; smoked trout (not enough of it) with shaved leeks and orange sections; and duck confit, the star of the evening. The crackly duck skin and moist meat melted in my mouth, and roasted baby beets added a colorful flourish. The dish deserved my glass of earthy cote du Rhone red.

Dinner for two came to about \$100. Coming this fall: Cork Market, a retail wine and food shop.

### VINOTECA

There's no doubt that Vinoteca is a wine bar. Corks are piled everywhere, in windows, and in other receptacles including an otherwise-unused fireplace. The interior is replete with black banquettes and a burnished black marble bar, accented with bright red tiles. Bottles are arranged front to back, goosing each other along a narrow ledge dividing the dining areas.

Tucked into a townhouse off U Street, NW, Vinoteca is two years old. Although Sunday evenings feature Flamenco

#### Cork

1720 14th St. NW  
202-265-2675  
www.corkdc.com  
Open for dinner only;  
closed Monday; Cork does not  
take reservations.

#### Vinoteca Wine Bar and Bistro

1940 11th St. NW  
202-332-9463  
www.vinotecadc.com  
Open Tuesday through Saturday  
for dinner only; Sunday from  
11 a.m. until closing.  
Closed Monday.

#### Proof

775 G St. NW  
202-737-7663  
www.proofdc.com  
Open daily for lunch and dinner

music inside, gorgeous weather drew us outdoors, where we sat at a wooden table with rattan trim. We were surrounded by a young, hip crowd. Our waiter, Kevin, was knowledgeable and helpful, in spite of being on the job a scant two weeks.

Unlike Europe-centric Cork's, Vinoteca's wine list encompasses vintages from the "Old and New" worlds. We could have ordered a "flight," a trio of champagnes ("Bubbles"), whites, roses, or red wines grouped according to grape and/or region.

I decided on a \$10 glass of New Zealand Wild Rock Sauvignon Blanc from the wine-rich Marlborough area, while Peter sipped Bethal Heights Pinot Gris (Oregon's Willamette Valley, \$16).

There's serious cooking at Vinoteca, thanks to new executive chef Lonnie Zoller, who has wielded his whisk at Zaytinya (Penn Quarter) and Hook (Georgetown). Having never encountered roasted eggplant gazpacho, we went for it. The savory chilled soup was enlivened with morsels of feta and sprinkled with sumac, a pungent Persian spice.

Peter started with a colorful mosaic of red, white and yellow beets with bright green kale. Another seldom-seen dish is bluefish, a sustainable fish (not surprising, since Hook, one of chef Zoeller's previous restaurants, specializes in environmentally-friendly seafood). Poised atop a bed of grilled baby vegetables, the grilled bluefish had a crunchy crust infused with za'atar, a Jordanian spice blend. Peter ordered cannelloni filled with shredded rabbit (grown on a Pennsylvania farm). The cannelloni, which resembled large crepes, was paired with goat cheese and Swiss chard. Both entrees complemented our Oregon Pinot Noir from the Willamette Valley. We were tempted by the list of sliders, including beef with cheddar, lamb with feta, portabello mushroom with hummus.

We actually found room for dessert: Options encompassed a flight of cheeses (cow, goat, sheep). I settled for a blue cheese from Oregon (Rogue). The wedge arrived with a tablespoon of honey (for dipping) cracker bread and a plump date. Peter's sweet tooth lured him to coffee-infused creme brulee, presented in a large white coffee cup. Accompanying these dinner finales were late harvest Sauvignon Blanc and Domaine Dominique Cotes de Nuit Cuvee, a robust Burgundy. All that came to \$150, before tip.

## PROOF

Proof's 57-page wine list reminded me of a long-ago dinner at the famous Trois Gros restaurant in Roanne, France. As I gazed at that lengthy carte du vin, unfamiliar names danced before my eyes. Then I took a deep breath and

selected a fine Pouilly-Fuisse to accompany our l'escalope de saumon and lotte aux cepes.

I felt equally overwhelmed by the wine list at Proof, the dressy wine bar which opened July 4, 2007 in Penn Quarter. Encompassing 1,000 selections from around the world, prices range from a \$10,500 Chateau Cheval Blanc to down-to-earth vintages from South America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa—tagged at \$50 and under.

Proof's luncheon list is a more manageable dozen wines grouped according to region and grape. Wines-by-the-glass come in 2, 6 and 8.5-ounce servings, allowing guests to sample several. Many bottles are stored sideways in a stunning wine rack in the front of the restaurant.

Designed by GrizForm (Connecticut Ave. NW, which also did Capitol Hill's Sonoma), Proof's decor is a vision of burnished copper-trimmed dining room dividers, polished walnut floors and a beautiful, zinc-covered bar imported from France. Sporting a marble counter, the charcuterie and fromagerie dispense umpteen kinds of sausage and 30 cheeses, divided by goat, cow, and sheep.

At lunch, husband Peter selected a Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc, dry and crisp, perfect for a light summer repast. I'm on a rosé kick. Fortunately, these lovely wines have overcome the stigma caused by those awful white Zinfandels of the 1980s. Proof's "rosé of the day" came from Provence, where they know how to make it. The delicate pink wine complemented my shrimp burger nicely. Snuggled inside toasted brioche, the patty was moist with a crisp crust. Shredded daikon radish and carrots, thinly shaved cucumber and jalapeno added zip. Peter's salad Nicoise was made with what tasted like high-quality canned tuna with properly cooked green beans, olives, hard boiled egg wedges, croutons and summer-ripe tomatoes.

I was pleased to spot wild mushroom quiche on Proof's menu. This once-scorned brunch dish ("Real Men Don't Eat Quiche") is staging a culinary comeback. On executive chef Haidar Karoum's imaginative dinner menu: grilled Spanish octopus with chickpea-potato salad; veal sweetbreads with Roquefort and smoked bacon; honey-and-spice-glazed Peking duck breast.

Proof is pricey (lunch for two is \$51, with wine). It's not a place for a quick bite, but a destination for leisurely celebrating someone's birthday or promotion. ★



LEFT: Proprietor Paul Carlson pauses between customers in front of his extensive wine cellar.

BELOW: Poised atop grilled baby vegetables, crispy-skinned bluefish is enhanced with za'atar, a Jordanian spice blend.



ABOVE: The restaurant's handsome, marble-topped charcuterie and fromagerie provide tastes of France.



LEFT: Proof executive chef/owner Haidar Karoum takes a break from his busy kitchen.