

Fort Lauderdale, Florida-based Pizza Fusion has made a commitment to wine since its inception in 2006. The eight-unit chain has 30 labels on its wine list and encourages consumers to experiment with its wine-themed promotions.





Fast By The Glass

As Americans grow more comfortable with wine as an everyday drink, the category's presence in the fast casual sector continues to expand

By Mary E. Keefe

America's growing affinity for wine has led the category into previously uncharted territory: fast casual dining. At Sauce Pizza & Wine, a four-unit gourmet pizzeria that also serves sandwiches and salads, wine is so important it's even in the Scottsdale, Arizona-based chain's name. "Americans drink soda with their food for the most part," says Regan Jasper, director of hospitality and beverage at Fox Restaurant Concepts, which owns Sauce. "But in the Italian fast casual segment, wine makes a lot of sense." The company decided to include wine on Sauce's menu in order to replicate the true Italian dining experience. "And we just believe that pizza and wine go hand in hand," adds Jasper, who is a certified sommelier.

PHOTO BY JOE WOOLF

Each Sauce location carries nine wines, offered by the glass and bottle, ranging from McWilliam's Shiraz (\$5 a glass; \$20 a 750-ml. bottle) to Tin Roof Sauvignon Blanc (\$6; \$24). When Jasper selects wines, the most important factors are value and approachability. "We don't list the vintages and we don't include obscure varietals," he says.

Sauce also offers beer, which has been on its menu since the chain opened in 2003, with selections ranging from Bud Light (\$3.25 a bottle) to Sierra Nevada Pale Ale and Peroni (each \$4). Wine comprises 76 percent of total beverage alcohol sales, representing a slight slip from 78 percent in the chain's first year. Jasper attributes that shift to growth in the lunch business at the newer locations in Arizona and Colorado.

Another pizza concept that's made wine integral to its business model is Pizza Fusion, a 75-percent organic gourmet pizzeria based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Wine has been on the menu of this eight-unit chain since its launch in 2006. Ashley Rathgeber, Pizza Fusion's supply chain developer, says the company wants people to come in and relax, and she feels that offering a glass of wine is a great way to do that. But Rathgeber recalls the initial difficulty in finding distributors that carried the organic wines they wanted. Currently, Pizza Fusion offers roughly 30 wines, ranging from Frey Natural White (\$5 a glass; \$19 a 750-ml. bottle) to Organic Vintners Pinot Noir (\$11; \$28). The wine selections vary by location and are tailored to local customer demographics.



Sauce Pizza & Wine strives to present an authentic Italian dining experience, offering nine wines by the glass and bottle. The chain keeps its wine menu simple, focusing on value and approachability with its selection of well-known varietals.

Pizza Fusion offers interesting promotions like "free wine Tuesday," which gives customers a free bottle of the weekly featured wine with any purchase of \$25 or more. "It's a great way to get people to try the wine," Rathgeber says. But she also notes the effectiveness of hand-selling. To encourage her staff, even in this fast casual setting, she brings in winery representatives so employees can feel comfortable making suggestions to customers. Wine accounts for slightly more than 10 percent of Pizza Fusion's sales. The chain also has a selection of organic beer (\$4 to \$9 on draft and by the bottle). The restaurant is currently working on a menu that will offer wine and food pairings, scheduled to debut early next year.



Wine makes up slightly more than 10 percent of total sales at Pizza Fusion. Even in its fast casual setting, the restaurant provides its employees with wine training so they can interact with guests and make pairing suggestions.

PHOTOS: (TOP) COURTESY OF FOX RESTAURANTS CONCEPTS; (BOTTOM) JOE WOOLF



Instead of focusing on a by-the-glass program, Lime Fresh Mexican Grill in Miami sells 375-ml. bottles of wine. Founder and CEO John Kunkel prefers the half-bottles because he says they better maintain wine's freshness for glass pours than opened full-sized bottles.

Asian And Latin Flair

Mama Fu's, a 15-unit, Austin, Texas-based pan-Asian chain, has carried wines since it opened in 2003. Randy Murphy, president and CEO of Murphy Adams Restaurant Group, which runs six Mama Fu's locations, says wine works well with the concept because its higher ticket prices attract a sophisticated crowd that happens to skew female. He notes that the eight wines offered are "middle of the road wines that are well-accepted, have mass appeal and good value." Labels range from Ferrari-Carano Pinot Grigio (\$4.99 a glass; \$19.99 a 750-ml. bottle) to Stone Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon (\$5.99; \$23.99). Wine and beer at Mama Fu's share roughly equal sales volumes, contributing between 42 and 43 percent of beverage alcohol sales each, with the remainder coming from sake. Overall, wine makes up 4 percent of total sales.

Another business practice that's helping wine sales at Mama Fu's is what Murphy calls the restaurant's "flux casual" model. At night, the restaurant turns into a full-service establishment. "Customers are more willing to go for the second glass with full service," Murphy says. That setup has been in place for about two years, and more than half of Mama Fu's locations currently operate at that level. Going forward, all new properties will follow that model. "We're very interested to see how it will help wine sales," Murphy adds. "We've had the brand for four to five months, and we have yet to put marketing efforts behind wines. Some customers know we have wine, but not all of them do."

At the four-unit Lime Fresh Mexican Grill, a Miami-based, Mexican-style cantina, founder and CEO John Kunkel also focuses on wine. "We're trying to do upscale fast casual, so it makes sense," Kunkel says, though he notes that there were growing pains initially in determining the best way to present wine in the fast casual setting. "It's a tough sell, mainly because of the glassware, as you have to serve it in a plastic cup," Kunkel says.

Kunkel started out serving wine by the glass at Lime Fresh, but when that wasn't working, he switched to offering splits about a year ago. Currently, he serves Doña Consuelo Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon (\$7.50 a 375-ml. bottle) in this format. "For me, the split is a nice option for consumers," Kunkel says. "It's better than by-the-glass, because you don't need to get through the volume to preserve the taste once you open a bottle of wine."

However, his most successful wine beverage is actually the Frozen Sangria (\$4.75 to \$5.25, depending on location), which outsells regular wine by

more than double. In total, wine makes up 10 percent of the restaurant's sales, but Kunkel believes in wine's future in the fast casual setting. That belief is underlined by his latest venture, a burger joint that will carry wines to be paired with each specialty burger offered. "It will take some creativity to make it work," Kunkel says. "If people are going to pay a certain amount for a type of wine, they're going to expect a certain quality."

Burgers Meet Wine

Wine has already found its place in fast casual burger concepts by big hitters like Danny Meyer and Bobby Flay. Shake Shack, operated by Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group, is New York City's answer to a roadside food stand. It has carried wine and beer with its gourmet burgers and hot dogs since opening in 2004. "Being sort of a gathering place, we thought it should be a spot where you could get a high-quality burger with a great glass of wine," says Shake Shack managing partner Randy Garutti. "We were inspired by places in Napa, where they're serious about wine." Shake Shack sells two proprietary wines, Shack Chard (\$6 a glass; \$23 a 750-ml. bottle) and Shack Shiraz (\$6.50; \$25), along with Vin Gris de Cigare Rosé by Bonny Doon (\$6.50; \$25) and 10 to 15 half bottles, ranging from the 2006 King Estate Pinot Gris (\$17 a 375-ml. bottle) to the 2004 Opus One (\$98). Garutti concedes that he sells about twice as much beer as wine, but he thinks that the wine business will only expand.



Bobby's Burger Palace (left) in Lake Grove, New York, the new fast casual concept from Food Network star Bobby Flay, offers proprietary white and red blends to pair with its gourmet hamburgers. Meanwhile, Arizona-based Zinburger (below) features 23 wines on its menu, and aims to hit all price points.



Bobby Flay's new Bobby's Burger Palace, in Lake Grove, New York, serves two proprietary wines to accompany its selection of 10 gourmet burgers in an upscale fast casual setting. Flay's longtime business partner Laurence Kretchmer says the wine, beer and spirits offerings, as well as the chic décor and finely dressed staff, move the concept above the typical fast casual segment. "We're not trying to make a lot of money selling wine," Kretchmer says, "But it's a way to provide a more adult experience, what we are calling 'convenient casual.'"

The two wines—the Meritage blend BBP Red and the Pinot Grigio BBP White—are available by the glass (\$4.50) and 750-ml. bottle (\$20). Kretchmer says they're meant to offer value as well as reinforce the new brand. "Consumer response has been great," he notes. "We don't serve it in stemware because it wouldn't go with the concept. But you can get a glass of wine for less than our shakes." Instead, wine is served in 9-ounce tumbler glasses.

Zinburger, a new eatery from Fox Restaurant Concepts in Tucson, Arizona, is also making headway in the marriage of burgers and wine. "Fox Restaurant Concepts has always been known for its strong wine programs, so we went into this venture thinking that burgers and wine made more sense to us than your typical burger-and-brew concept, which you can find everywhere," Jasper says. "The great thing is that burgers and wine also happen to go really well together."

While Zinburger pushes the boundaries of fast casual with its higher price points and quasi-table service, the variety of the menu and the restaurant's relaxed atmosphere show how far fast casual has evolved. To demonstrate this point, Jasper notes the versatility of the concept. "We were careful to provide several options at various price points," he says. "For



example, you can get a \$14 Kobe Burger and a \$12 glass of wine. Or you can choose an \$8 burger and a \$6 glass of wine. All price options are open." Zinburger carries 23 wine selections, ranging from Glass Mountain Merlot (\$5 a glass; \$20 a 750-ml. bottle) to Saintsbury Pinot Noir (\$15; \$60).

Making Inroads

While serving wine in the fast casual segment is still a fledgling concept, the current level of experimentation is certainly catching on. "It takes time," says Kretchmer of Bobby's Burger Palace. "We definitely sell more beer. People think more about a burger and a beer than a burger and wine." Meanwhile, Murphy notes that Mama Fu's plans to raise awareness of its wine availability with a marketing campaign slated for the end of the year. And at Shake Shack, Garutti says the wine selections will continue to expand. "It started out as a small part of the concept," he says, "but it's grown to be a more robust program."

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