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LIFESTYLES

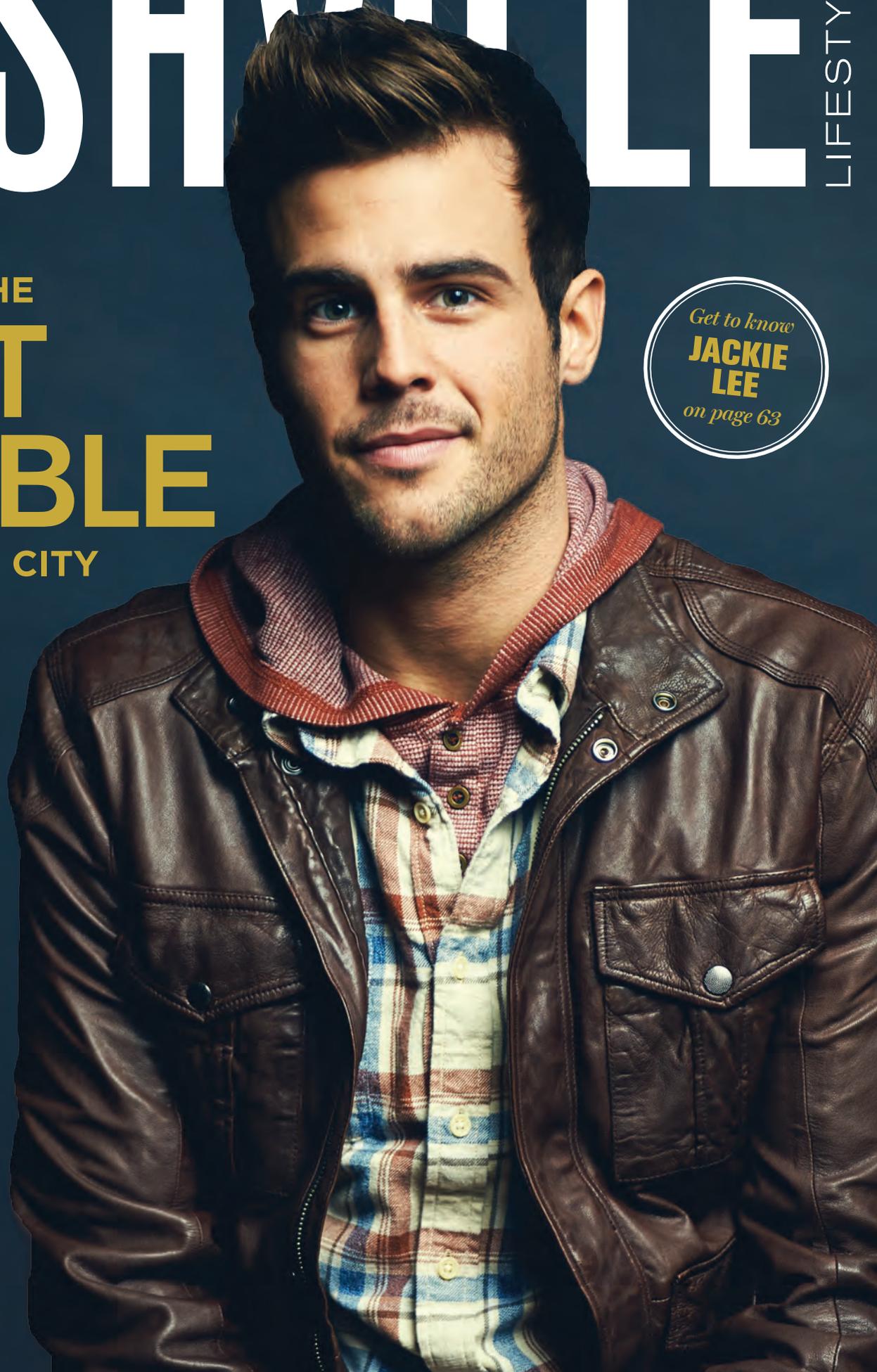
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Buzz Worthy

Fueled by a spike in new restaurants, Nashville's wine scene is getting better with age.

BY ERIN BYERS MURRAY

Later this month, about 600 wine lovers will spend a weekend swirling their way through Pairings, a three-day wine and dining event put on by the Nashville Wine Auction. Now in its third year, Pairings is the organization's more approachable (read: skewed younger) sister event to its annual l'Été du Vin. (The auction lots will average \$200 to \$300 each and all the visiting chefs are from Brooklyn; for more info, see page 23.) While also raising money for the group's many cancer-related beneficiaries, the weekend will gather just about every type of wine drinker in Nashville: novices, geeks, food lovers, and, of course, serious collectors.

What the Nashville Wine Auction is tapping into is the same idea that a key group of Nashville restaurateurs have come to understand: Nashville's wine palate is changing. There's a new wave of savvy wine lovers hitting town, including thousands of recent transplants who hail from bigger markets. They stalk Eater for the latest chef news, they aren't afraid to pair Champagne with hot chicken—and they're clamoring for eclectic wine lists.

Nashville long ago established its love affair with good juice—the Nashville Wine Auction was conceived in 1980 and has since grown into one of the country's premier wine fundraising events, drawing legendary vintners like Château Margaux to our little corner of the state. But even back in the '90s, when local restaurants with *Wine Spectator*-recognized lists like The Wild Boar and F. Scott's were in their prime (both are now closed), the rest of the world only validated Blackberry Farm as a player in the Tennessee wine world.

Today, Nashville finally has its own national buzz, thanks to a combination of several established players and new arrivals. What started in a sleepy shopping complex in Belle Meade at 360 Bistro has blossomed with the opening of places like City House, Rolf and Daughters, and Husk. This year, City Winery will bring wine production within our city limits. Add the news about wine going into grocery stores



and package stores being allowed to sell nonalcoholic items and it's official: Nashville's wine scene is having a moment.

WITH THE SHUTTERING of F. Scott's this past spring, Nashville lost a strong wine list—but it didn't lose the person behind it. Elise Loehr, former co-owner of F. Scott's and current co-owner of Table 3, has long been considered one of the city's top authorities—she's worked her way up to the advanced level of the Court of Master Sommeliers and passed two of the three exams for the master. And that's exactly why 360 Bistro owner and wine director Nick Jacobson scooped her up as an assistant manager and sommelier for his establishment. "I joke around that I'm spying on another restaurant," says Loehr of her split duties. But in truth, she's likely the only person in town, aside from Jacobson, who is knowledgeable enough to present 360's list to a table. With 1,000 selections and a 5,000-bottle inventory, it's by far the vastest in the area.

Jacobson opened 360 as a franchise wine bar called The Grape in 2005. By 2007, he was ready to change up the model and add a better food menu, so he went independent. "I think I saw what was about to happen in Nashville in terms of this boom in the restaurant culture," he says. "So, how does a little restaurant in Belle Meade continue to be relevant? For me, it was by creating a wine list that I could control and that speaks for itself."

Clearly it does—the list has been awarded *Wine Spectator's* Best of Award of Excellence for four years and counting. And while it boasts what Loehr calls "an extraordinary selection of Rhone wines," you'll also find plenty of entry-level and familiar names, like Silver Oak and Caymus. "Every now and then I'll hear a comment about, 'Oh, their wines are so expensive,' [but] we have 200 selections that cost under \$100 a bottle," Jacobson says.

What he and Loehr (and every other person interviewed for this piece) struggle with is the conservative nature of the local consumer. To an outsider looking at Nashville's many wine lists, it might appear that there's a limitation as to what types of wines are coming into the city. The reality, says Jacobson, "is that once you get [unique, rare bottles] on your list, no one's going to buy them." He calls it an economically driven problem that wasn't so widespread before the recession hit. "I think Nashville is still unwilling, for the most part, to spend much money on alcohol," he adds. "Which really limits people like us from being aggressive and bringing in these epic wines."

But he's working on it. Two years ago, Jacobson was the first in Nashville to introduce his list on an iPad. Last year, he purchased the city's first Coravin, a \$300 wine opener that uses a medical-grade needle to pour wine from a bottle without actually removing the cork. "Something I've always taken pride in—besides the list—is being on the >>>

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forefront of the wine industry in this city,” he says. A few other locals have recently joined him.

A FORMER MANAGER at Jacobson’s 360 Bistro, Brett Allen is part of Nashville’s new-era wine culture. He runs the wine program as a manager at Prima, the latest restaurant to debut in The Gulch where a glittering 3,000-bottle wine cave overlooks the dining room. Allen’s been around since Nashville first fell in love with wine—he and his father once owned The Wild Boar, which closed in 2006. Today, he says, “there’s a new buzz coming to town from all the great write-ups we’ve had. [...] It’s brought a lot of new blood. People who are used to larger markets have enabled a lot of the restaurants to rethink what Nashville used to be, what it now is, and what it can be.” His list at Prima will reflect that once the doors have been open a bit longer, he says, adding that he plans to stock up on futures and pre-releases and to generally build up the inventory with time.

At Prima, the wine list is hyper-tailored to the restaurant’s cuisine. “When Jim [Lewis of Community Hospitality] and I were putting the list together, chef Salvador Avila’s menu really came first. We wanted to build a program around what his food would dictate,” Allen says, which is why there’s emphasis on Spanish, Italian, and French wines.

Thatsame mantra runs through The404 Kitchen, where beverage director Travis Brazil boasts 230 selections, an impressive number considering that on any given night, chef Matt Bolus’s food menu is only about nine or ten items long. Brazil moved here two and a half years ago from Los Angeles, where he managed one of California’s largest organic and biodynamic lists at The Inn of the Seventh Ray. He was determined to make a splash in this town but—like many newcomers coming here from larger markets—was frustrated when he first looked over Nashville’s wine offerings. “I was highly disappointed by being able to tell in 38 seconds that the wine list had been created by the liquor rep,” Brazil says.

Once he started building his own list, he found the source of the problem. Some distributors, he learned, didn’t wish to work with him on bringing in different products. “They would say, ‘Nashvillians won’t buy that.’ And I’d say, ‘Well, yeah, that’s because you’re not offering it.’ But look around—there are high-rise flats going up all around us. For me, the objective’s become: If you build it, they will come.” So far, he says he’s helped introduce as many as 50 new wines to the state, all to complement chef

Bolus’s menu. “Nashvillians deserve the same wine list as they’d get in New York, L.A., or anywhere else,” Brazil adds.

That attitude has also spurred folks like Mollie Ward at Rolf and Daughters to craft wine lists that are interesting and tightly edited. Originally from Nashville, Ward moved back here from New York, where she was a manager at Landmarc, a restaurant with an impressive wine pedigree. To match chef Philip Krajeck’s food, Ward, who is the general manager and wine director, has devised a list that’s almost entirely Old World with a heavy emphasis on organic, dynamic, and natural selections. “When I first put the list together, nobody knew us,” she says. “Getting some of the wines I was used to being able to see or drink or have on a list—the allocations are so small here, they were already spoken for among a handful of people. So it took us a minute to build relationships with people and to show that we can move and sell some of those things.” The Rolf list started off conservative, she says, with a number of domestic wines, but gradually, she’s gotten it where she wants it to be. “I’m constantly impressed [by] what people order

“A lot of change is already happening. We’re in a very strong period of evolution here in Nashville.” —Elise Loehr

now. I’ve got a small list and a small storage, so I try to keep it super focused. I don’t have a [cabernet sauvignon], I don’t have a pinot, so people are in some ways forced to branch

out a little bit.”

At Husk, sommelier Andy Wedge has the only list in town that’s organized by soil type. “On the surface, it seems like a pretty pretentious way of doing it,” he admits. “But anything we can do to get the conversation started and guests trying something new is a positive.” The list requires a well-trained staff, which he says can be challenging to acquire in a city where there are now more jobs than talent to fill them. “Our goal is to find and cultivate that talent,” he adds.

Wedge works to keep Husk’s list full of good value: There are about 50 bottles available, all priced under \$100; a reserve list carries 20 more bottles that run a little higher. That price tag is important, says Wedge, referring again to the Nashville consumer: “With the tax structure in place [here], the prices are always going to be more expensive than other places,” he admits. “I’ve looked at bringing certain wines into the market and thought, Wow, it’s just not worth it because we’ll never sell these wines at this price. Twenty-four point twenty-five percent alcohol tax is just insane.” (Loehr argues that it could be worse: “In comparison to a state like Pennsylvania, we have a dream taxation system, where [there] they pay 60

percent on alcohol for on-premise. Is [our tax] the best scenario? No. But it's certainly not the worst.")

THERE'S NO QUESTION that the price of wine is elevated when it's sold in Tennessee versus other states. So as more beverage directors and sommeliers make strides to bring in rare and hard-to-find wines, the biggest challenge will be enticing Nashville diners to spend their money—and understand when they're getting a good value.

At City Winery, guests are finding that value both on the list and in the broad range of wines on tap, which general manager David Richter says are "fl ipping off the shelves." Currently, they offer wines made at their New York location (as well as juice made by other vintners), but once the permitting is in place later this year—possibly by summer—they plan to start making wines inside their Nashville facility. They also have more than 400 bottles on their list, which was crafted by Richter and beverage director David Mensch (collectively, the two have worked with über chefs and wine personalities including Mario Batali, Joe Bastianich, David Burke, and Bobby Flay). There are also three dedicated sommeliers on staff—unheard of in this town—whose only job, says Mensch, "is to go around and talk to people about wine, whiskey, and beer all day. [...] So we're trying to spend as much time possible educating our guests."

And they're doing it beyond the nightly dinner rush—from staging dinners where they pair wine with music to arranging private cheese and wine tastings, they plan on filling their multilevel space with a constant stream of events for wine lovers. And when the time comes for the winery to start producing, they'll invite customers to be involved with that, too, whether it's helping with the crush or learning how to blend varietals. And for those looking for a serious investment? City Winery will eventually roll out a barrel membership program where guests can be a part of the entire process, from the creation of the wine to tasting it as it ages. "When you're done, you have 252 bottles to share with your family and friends," says Richter. "The ways that we can create an experience and education around wine are really endless."

Back at 360 Bistro, Jacobson and Loehr are just excited about the upswing in interest in wine that's spreading across town—from customers to service staff to fellow professionals. "A lot of change is already happening," Loehr says. "We're in a very strong period of evolution here in Nashville." 🍷



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