

Back Wine Bar

A Vintage Hot Spot for Quality Food and Wine

By LYNN MACHON

In opening Back Wine Bar in May 2008, Jeff and Gail Back's goal was to establish a small, neighborhood gathering spot - a welcoming and friendly place, nothing pretentious.

Today, the thriving venue routinely bursts at the seams with jean-clad foodies spilling out onto the adjacent patio to sip wine, eat great food and mingle.

This popularity is not surprising. With 18 years experience in the restaurant industry, Back is a knowledgeable, albeit humble, sommelier and restaurateur. In perfect complement, Gail's background in accounting and customer service means that when she's not serving as the congenial host, she adeptly handles all back-of-the-house operations.

It's an unbeatable pairing, to say the least. When the couple recently welcomed their first baby late last year, he was born

into an extended family of regular customers whom Jeff and Gail like to call their friends.

We talked to Jeff, along with Chef Eric Johnson, about the deliberate blend of elements that make Back Wine Bar so unique.

Q: What led you to open a wine bar?

Jeff: I always wanted my own restaurant, and with my wine background, we decided to open a wine bar. We wanted to make it casual but sophisticated at the same time. Most wine bars in big cities just focus on foot traffic but we really wanted a small, Cheers-type wine bar in a nice community where we would have regulars come in all the time. There's nothing like this around here.

Q: How has your passion for wine developed over the years?

Jeff: Well, I completed my first wine class in 1998 and then worked as a sommelier or manager in fine dining restaurants across the country. Most recently, I was the manager and sommelier at 58 Degrees & Holding Co. in midtown Sacramento. Then I went to Seattle to study wine through the International Sommelier Guild's intense year and a half program. As a result, I can talk to anybody and everybody about wine.

Q: Where do you get the amazing assortment of boutique wines?

Jeff: Everywhere. I do go to some tastings, but I know what I like, and I know what I'm looking for. I'll taste 20 to 30 wines each week and select maybe one or two that will work. I'm very picky and I try



Photos by Charm Photography

Back Wine Bar owner Jeff Back and Chef Eric Johnson deliver appetizing delectables as well as a wide assortment of excellent wines.

and cater the wine list to our guests. I also change the list almost every week, so even for our regulars, there's always something new.

Q: Wines aside, can customers come in for a full meal too?

Jeff: When we first opened, we really focused on getting the word out about food... that we're a restaurant, too. A lot of people are surprised at the good quality of food we serve. It's not your typical small portions, but it's not huge entrees either.

Eric: It's "sharable" food. Everything we have, we plate so people can share it.

Q: How would you describe the menu?

Eric: I do a little of everything; you could call it California fusion. I do Hawaiian Ahi, Italian paninis and bruschetta and an all-American steak sandwich. We also have entree specials such as grilled salmon and grilled steaks. We really focus on fresh and seasonal. Our pizzas are excellent, as is our new Maché salad with goat cheese, crushed almonds, roasted butternut squash and fig balsamic dressing. It's really, really good.

Jeff: We like to focus on the balance in each dish - acidity, sweetness, tartness and the different textures. We also try to make everything healthy, so we don't load people with a bunch of starch.

Q: Do you have a favorite wine and food combination?

Both: Absolutely. Our steak sandwich and the Yorba Amador County Barbera - it's a great pairing. 🍷

