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Cask Room an East Village pioneer

by Nicole Sours Larson
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His artisan cheeses come from Venissimo, his desserts from Extraordinary Desserts, his breads from Bread & Cie, and his wines – the stars of the Cask Room in the East Village – come from small producers all over the world.

Owner Mike Kallay opened the Cask Room, at 550 Park Blvd., in 2005. It was the first 'night business' in the East Village.

A bored and burned-out refugee from the software world, Mike Kallay had been looking for a viable way into the wine business for years – as well as an escape from his daily grind designing software – when he had his “ah-ha! moment.”

“I really felt the wine industry was calling my name,” he said, but he hadn’t quite figured out where in the industry he belonged. He had been sitting for two hours in a traffic jam on Interstate 5, yearning for a cozy wine bar, when he got the idea to open his own. Following research, he decided to bet on an East Village location based on his experience in Denver, where he had watched the renaissance of the once-gritty neighborhood surrounding the city’s new ballpark.

Kallay, 37, and wife Stephanie opened the Cask Room in late 2005 at 550 Park Blvd. at Market Street, right by the trolley stop. They were the first to sign a lease to operate a “night business” in the East Village and are still one of the pioneers wagering on the gentrification of the once-seedy neighborhood. They also worked with the East Village Community Action Network (EVCAN) to ensure that their business was a good fit for the community and one that locals would enjoy, according to Brenda Kayzar, an EVCAN member and regular patron.

In addition to creating a congenial gathering place for local residents, Kallay enjoys sharing his knowledge of wine and emphasizes the informational aspect, for those interested in learning more about wine.

“A goal here is education, and I’m trying to make a comfortable setting, both physically and emotionally,” he said, explaining why he furnished his wine bar as a lounge with overstuffed leather sofas, chairs and coffee tables rather than as a dining room.

Stop by the Cask Room any evening after 5 p.m. and you’ll note the buzz of animated conversations punctuated with laughter and sprinkled with discussions about just-poured wines, as lively groups gather at the bar or sink into sofas. Kallay estimates that about 90 percent of his customers live locally, most in the East Village, walking rather than driving, as in many urban locales. It’s a fairly young crowd, predominantly in their mid-20s to mid-40s, with others fitting easily into the mix.

Customers can order wines (and a few beers) by the glass, at prices ranging from \$6 to \$12, or select any bottle from the retail inventory and add a corkage fee of \$10 a bottle. The wine list changes about every two weeks so that returning customers always have something fresh to try.

The wine bar offers a light menu complementing the wines, including cheese plates, olives, hummus and tapenade, crab cakes, salad and gateaux.

Music and art are also part of the mix. Tuesday night brings jazz, as guitarist Jon Garner performs

every week from 7 to 10 p.m., now joined by a changing accompanist each week.

“The East Village has the history of being bohemian, with a lot of artists. I’m trying to maintain the link by having rotating exhibits of local artists’ work,” Kallay said.

For his menu of wines by the glass, he concentrates on relatively rare limited bottlings.

“I don’t want to be focusing on wines you can get anywhere else,” he said, explaining his preference for wines of 500 cases or fewer production.

For his retail customers, he emphasizes good values and great finds, often around \$10 a bottle. For wine club members, he looks for “unique things you haven’t tasted before” and includes a newsletter describing the winery and the region.

Once a month, working with wine educator Lindsay Pomeroy of The Wine Smarties, he hosts a limited-attendance wine education event, surveying a specific type of wine, region or food and wine combination. March 21’s event centers on Spanish wines, with the title “the sleeping giant awakens,” and requires pre-registration. April’s event will focus on the aging process of wines.

At least once a month, Kallay holds a special tasting with a visiting wine distributor or winemaker, detailed in the Cask Room’s monthly newsletter.

“The Cask Room is probably one of the best-kept secrets in San Diego. Mike Kalley has a passion for wine,” said Ryan King, a representative for Henry Wine Group. “If you are looking for the boring standard wine varietals at high prices, then the Cask Room is not for you. Mike loves to find little gems that are small production and obscure that are also high on quality at a fair price,” he added.

For more information, visit the Cask Room’s Web site at www.caskroom.com or call (619) 822-1606. The Cask Room is located at 550 Park Blvd. #2104. Hours are 5 to 10 p.m. daily and until midnight Fridays and Saturdays.

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