

# Self-Serve Brings New Life To Wine Bars

Wine bars attract customers by offering smaller pours and a vast array of labels in a hands-on setting.



Venues like Wisconsin's two-unit The Ruby Tap (pictured) have begun allowing customers to pour their own wines.

Looking to stand apart, bar operators are turning to self-serve wine stations to bring in new clientele. These machines enable the sampling of wines that aren't often sold by the glass while lessening the workload for staff. "People are skeptical at first, but then find that it's nice to try wines at their own pace without having to rely on a server," says Brook Boomer, who co-owns [The Ruby Tap](#) in the greater Milwaukee market with her sister, Sarah Smith. "We're constantly rotating the wines to provide a wide range of options."

The Ruby Tap has two locations in the Milwaukee suburbs of Wauwatosa and Mequon, Wisconsin. Each bar boasts four Enomatic wine machines that hold eight bottles apiece, offering a total of 32 different wines per location. The machines have three preset pour sizes—1½ ounces, 3 ounces and 6 ounces—allowing guests to choose how much they want to try. On average, wines range from \$2 to \$26 a 1½-ounce pour. The bars offer two payment options: prepaid cards that consumers purchase for a set amount and swipe at each machine or open tabs, whereby patrons leave their credit card at the bar and get an open wine card to swipe at any machine. The cards track how much each consumer is drinking. "The open tabs are much more popular," Boomer says. "Our staff is constantly moving about the bar to check on customers. If a customer appears to be intoxicated, we ask him or her to check out."

The Ruby Tap positions its Enomatic machines along one wall, with seating and tables nearby. The venue also has a retail license so that customers who find an interesting wine on tap can buy a full bottle to bring home (wines range from \$10 to \$300 a 750-ml. bottle). Boomer notes that consumers are adventurous and willing to try obscure labels from developing regions like Hungary. Along with wine, The Ruby Tap also offers beer (\$4 to \$8 a bottle) and snacks like cheese and charcuterie (\$2 to \$5 per item). “The machines add an extra energy and activity to the atmosphere,” Boomer says. “I often hear strangers talking about which wines they liked or didn’t like and suggesting wines to each other. The machines are user-friendly—great for newbies and aficionados.”



Splash Wine Lounge and Bistro in San Diego features 72 different wines via its Enomatic machines. The venue focuses on boutique offerings and also features expensive labels that guests might not otherwise get to try.

## Massive Selections

Temperature-controlled Enomatic machines allow operators to offer a broader array of glass pours. [The Wine Room](#) in Winter Park, Florida, has 19 Enomatic machines that pour a total of 156 wines in 1-ounce, 2½-ounce and 5-ounce servings (\$1 to \$25 a 1-ounce pour). The venue caters to all levels of wine knowledge by offering approachable labels like [Kim Crawford](#) Sauvignon Blanc, [Rodney Strong](#) Chalk Hill Chardonnay and [Oak Ridge Winery](#) Old Soul Pinot Noir alongside such ultra-premium wines as [Opus One](#), [Screaming Eagle](#) and [Tenuta Sassicaia](#).

The Wine Room's customers purchase tasting cards that can be used like debit cards at each Enomatic station. The venue also offers a variety of craft beers (\$4 to \$8 a draft pour or bottle) and a menu of flatbreads, meat skewers, gourmet grilled cheeses and shareable plates like baked poutine and bruschetta (food ranges from \$8 to \$13). The space is a bar–retail store hybrid, and guests can purchase a bottle of any wine they sample or enjoy it at the venue for a \$10 corkage fee. Wines range from \$8.99 to more than \$5,000 a 750-ml. bottle.

“Our customers like the education aspect of trying different wines, especially the wines that aren't usually available in a regular wine bar,” says The Wine Room general manager Jim Hepple.

“Everything revolves around the wine stations. People come in to try new wines and old favorites. We have seating areas all around the space, and the wine dispensing machines are conveniently located throughout. We're not a typical wine bar or wine shop, but a unique place to explore and experience great wine, one taste at a time.”

In Hawaii, [Amuse Wine Bar](#) at the Honolulu Design Center has 10 Enomatic units offering 80 self-serve wines. The machines are programmed to dispense 1-ounce pours (\$1 to \$25 an ounce), accessed via prepaid reloadable cards. Amuse Wine Bar is adjacent to the fine dining venue [Stage Restaurant](#), and the two spaces share a wine cellar, which allows Amuse to feature many upscale and unique labels. The wine machines are positioned directly between the venue's bar and the seating area to create visual appeal.

“We wanted a more modern, upscale feel for our bar, and the machines help provide that,” says Travis Kimura, the food and beverage manager for both Amuse Wine Bar and Stage Restaurant. “Self-service wine takes a bit of pressure off the bartenders, and pouring 1 ounce at a time helps keep customers from drinking at an excessively fast pace. The machines give us a chance to showcase wines that are hand-sells—wines that people might not know and wouldn't have ordered without getting the opportunity to try them first.”

Kimura says sweeter wines move fast at Amuse, pointing to labels like [Selbach-Oster](#) Riesling Spätlese and [Robert Mondavi](#) Moscato d'Oro. In addition, Cabernet Sauvignon always garners interest. Amuse routinely pours Cabernet Sauvignons from [Buehler Vineyards](#), [Cakebread Winery](#), [Silver Oak](#) Winery, [Paradigm Winery](#) and [Tricycle Wine Partners](#)' Obsidian Ridge label. The venue's bar also offers a full roster of specialty cocktails (\$8 to \$10) and a complete food menu with snacks, small plates, French bread pizzas, fish tacos, sliders and fried chicken (\$5 to \$15).

“We get a lot of business from millennials because the machines provide a more modern way of drinking,” Kimura says. “A lot of bar operators love the idea of self-serve wine machines, but are reluctant to actually move forward because of the high costs to install and maintain them. But these models are giving way to a new era of wines by the glass.”





The Ruby Tap (Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, unit pictured) offers wines in three preset sizes. Customers can use a prepaid option when sampling or go for an open tab, using a card to track their pours.

## Embracing The Future

California is a prominent market for self-serve wine bars—not surprising for a state renowned for being ahead of the curve. [Terravant: The Winery Restaurant](#) in Santa Barbara County offers over 50 wines from its self-serve stations, representing more than 20 local vineyards. In Corona, California, [Vino Veritas Wine Bar](#) pours 40-plus global wines from its machines. Meanwhile, [Vini Wine Bar](#) in Davis, California, and [Splash Wine Lounge and Bistro](#) in San Diego both offer 72 wines available for self-pouring.

“We try to feature unique varietals and mostly boutique wines,” says Traci Smith, owner of Splash Wine Lounge and Bistro. “The wine machines intrigue most people. The preservation system is beneficial, and being able to pour so many wines with a small staff is more profitable. But the best aspect is being able to offer something new and unique to customers. They love the concept.”

Smith opened Splash in 2008 in the midst of tough economic times, and she says the self-serve system helped her succeed. The bar has three large circular wine machines that pour red varietals positioned in the middle of the space and three additional machines that pour white wines along a side wall. Splash sells 1-ounce pours (49 cents to \$13) and aims to present wines that aren’t typically available in other restaurants, along with a handful of upscale, expensive labels that customers rarely get to sample. The bar uses prepaid cards to manage sales and has a retail license so that people can purchase full bottles of the wines they like. Wines range from \$8 to \$100 a 750-ml. bottle.

“Having the bottles presented in the machines and displaying the tasting notes allows people to try unique varietals and wines that are outside of their repertoire,” Smith explains. “The cost normally prevents over-consumption, and since our pours are all 1 ounce, customers usually taste a few and then buy a full glass from the bar or a bottle from the shop.”

Splash also has a list of house wines available by the traditional glass pour (\$6 to \$12), and specialty offerings from the Enomatic machines can be ordered in larger sizes by pushing the machine’s button multiple times. The venue sells snacks and flatbread pizzas, from brie and apples drizzled with agave syrup and topped with toasted pecans to charcuterie to pepperoni pizza (food is \$3 to \$16). Smith says her concept has major appeal with women between the ages of 25 and 46, and she notes that new wine drinkers often choose sweeter, fruit-forward offerings, while more sophisticated guests seek out Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Merlot and French labels.

“The machines contribute another interesting dimension to the bar’s décor, adding color, ambient lighting and intrigue,” Smith says. “They’re great for the wine industry because many young people who don’t think they like wine just haven’t found the right wine yet. Being able to offer 1-ounce pours, which is a very small commitment, allows new wine drinkers to find wines they enjoy and start their love affair with wine.”

