

San Francisco sister
restaurants redefine
Surf & Turf

An Epic Journey of Water

by Deborah Parker Wong

The unassuming façade of Pat Kuleto's new waterfront complex in San Francisco is a lesson in not judging a book by its cover, or a wine by its label. The two low-profile brick buildings house sister restaurants, Waterbar and Epic Roasthouse, which are connected by a courtyard that overlooks the Bay and by the wealth of talent behind their beverage programs.



Presentation of
gravlax at Waterbar.

Waterbar

When he was ready to take the helm of the beverage program at Waterbar, all Steve Izzo had to do was walk across the Embarcadero from his former role at neighboring One Market. Izzo, who began his career at a surf-and-turf restaurant in his New Jersey hometown, came to the beverage industry through a passion instilled by a multi-generational Italian family steeped in the culture of home winemaking and authentic, seasonal cuisine. At Waterbar, Izzo looks beyond his familiarity with domestic producers with a wine list that does justice to grower Champagnes, Burgundy and Bordeaux, as well as the spirits side of the business.

The seafood-focused menu at Waterbar is created by Executive Chef Parke Ulrich and Co-owner Mark Franz. "Their cuisine re-



The stunning raw bar at Waterbar.

minds me of meals I've had in Lisbon and on the coast of Spain," says Izzo; "pristine seafood that calls out for simple white wines that don't intrude on the food." To Izzo's surprise, white wine is outselling red two to one—a scenario he didn't anticipate and one that's not typical even in this category. He attributes the phenomenon to having esoteric wines on the list that are carefully hand-sold, and to his savvy sommeliers, who drive sales.

"Customers are very willing to break the 'rules,' but they are also seeking guidance," remarks Izzo. Sixty percent of his tables request the attention of a sommelier, and his staff works hard to head off confusion around navigating the list and making choices. "We're steering them toward the

richer whites and the type of pairings found in regions where seafood and wine-drinking have helped shape local culture."

A big advocate of domestic products, Izzo doesn't buy much of the criticism leveled at U.S. producers. "New World styles are by nature larger and riper; industry opinion leaders do more damage than good when they debate the merits of style." He notes a marked disconnect between what consumers are reading and what they practice: "In Italian culture, wine is synonymous with food; in the U.S., everyone seems to be fretting about wine."

Epic Roasthouse

Inspired by working with wine-savvy chefs and her desire to move well beyond a generic steakhouse wine list offering, Wine Director Nicole Burke pulled out all the stops with her over-400-bottle list for Waterbar's sister restaurant, Epic Roasthouse.

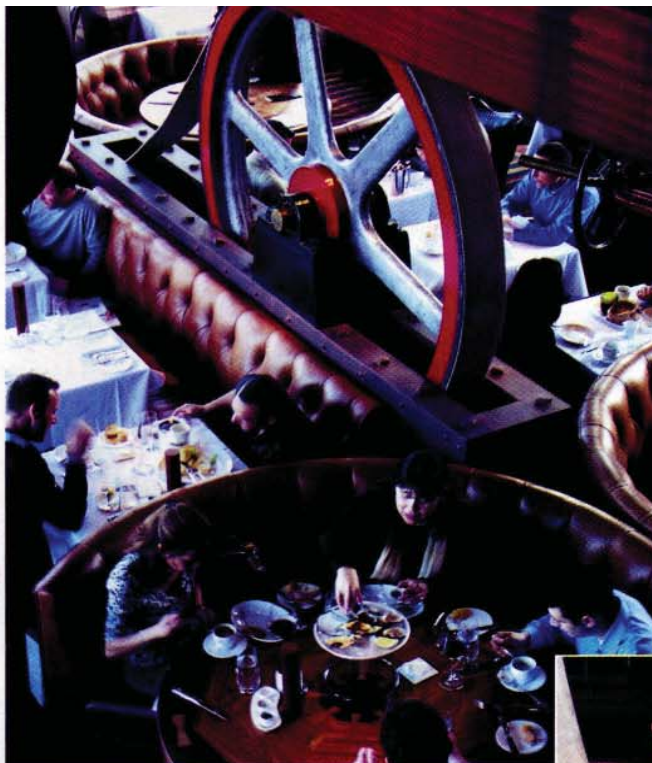
"Having the ability to build the wine program from the ground up meant that I could draw on the collective experiences of Executive Chef and Co-owner Jan Birnbaum and Pat Kuleto." The result is an eclectic wine program, with hard-to-find Cabernet Sauvignons from Napa and Sonoma at the heart of the list, which emphasizes varietals with an affinity for Birnbaum's New Orleans-inspired cuisine.

As the name implies, wood-roasted and grilled meats, poultry and seafood are the tour de force at Epic, but Burke was surprised by "a diversity and lightness in the menu that I didn't expect." Varietals such as bottle-aged Riesling, with its distinct petrol notes, and Syrah, a category with lots of diversity and good values, lend themselves to the roast house menu's bold, earthy flavors.

Burke, who is a contributor to THE TASTING PANEL and a rising star in her own right, distinguishes her wine program with a short list of "Epic Prospects," a page of up-and-



Steve Izzo heads the beverage program at Waterbar.



The dining room at Epic resembles a saltwater pumping station, circa the early 1900s.

coming winemakers that includes prospects to watch such as professional skateboarder Ryan Zepaltas, who makes a Santa Lucia Highlands Syrah, and Screaming Eagle winemaker Eric Anderson, who crafts Amador County Syrah with incredible finesse.

Throughout the list, she highlights New World/Old World partnerships like the collaboration between Richard Betts, Wine Director at Little Nell in Aspen, Colorado, and winemaker Gerard Chave, whose family has been making wine from the hill of Hermitage for six centuries. The result: an incredible Rhône wine filled with flowers, spice and earth. "The wine world is opening up," notes Burke, "and collaborations between modernists and traditionalists are producing some of today's most exciting wines. At the same time, cross-pollination should balance new and improved winemaking techniques, and not come at the expense of traditional flavor profiles."

There is no lack of drama in Burke's wine list, or in the dining room at Epic, which revolves around Kuleto's vision of an early industrial saltwater pumping station: A massive red wheel dominates the main room, and rusted metal ducts and grates all contribute to the authenticity of a station built to assist San Francisco's fire cisterns after the Great Earthquake and ensuing fires of 1906. Waterbar's 1,500-gallon circular fish tanks were designed to serve as the "distribution center" for the complex. ■■



Epic Roasthouse Wine Director Nicole Burke.