

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

June 11-12, 2011

COOKING & EATING

ON WINE: LETTIE TEAGUE



Here's to Chicago, That Tipplin' Town

HOG BUTCHER FOR the World. Player with Railroads. City of the Big Shoulders. These are a few of the lines from Carl Sandburg's famous take on Chicago, circa 1916. Today, Chicago might be better described as City of the Big Zinfandels. With access to some of the best wines in the world, and some first-rate restaurants (and funky wine bars), Chicago's wine scene is so vibrant, I'm willing to declare it the second-most important wine city in the country right now.

"I don't agree," said Paul Hart, one of the partners of the Chicago-based wine auction house Hart Davis Hart, when I shared my second-best theory with him. Mr. Hart and I were standing outside his office at the Hart Davis Hart headquarters on West Erie Street in downtown Chicago.

Was this just an example of Midwestern modesty? Perhaps Mr. Hart was thinking of other possible second-place cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles? He was not. "No, I think Chicago is the first-best wine city," he replied.

"Better than New York?" I couldn't help asking a bit incredulously. I know New Yorkers believe their city is best in every regard, but I think it's warranted when it comes to wine. "Yes," said Mr. Hart quite firmly.

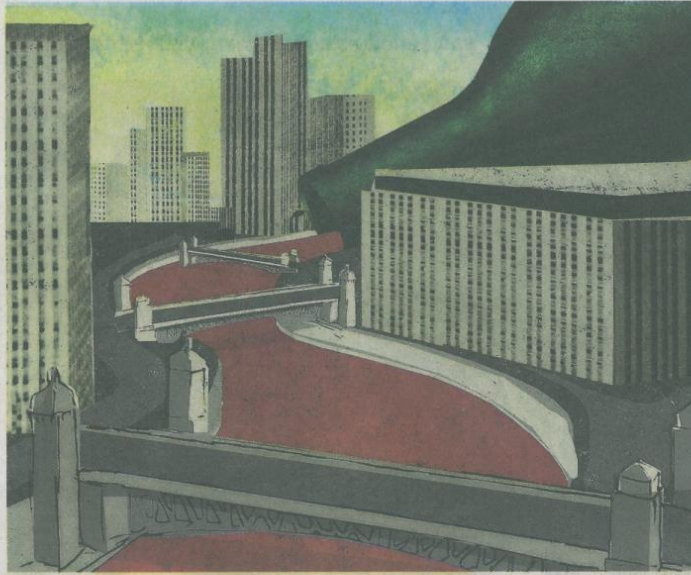
In 2010, the Hart Davis Hart team sold more wine at auction in the U.S. than any other auction house in America, including New York-based powerhouse like Acker Merrall and Zachys. (Those two houses sold more wine in Hong Kong.)

Of course, the wine auction scene is only one measure of a town's vinous standing. There's also the depth and breadth of restaurant wine lists. The character and diversity of wine bars are key, as are the selections at retail stores and, of course, the knowledge and passion of the people—the sommeliers, wine directors and retailers, not to mention the customers.

San Francisco and Los Angeles have a lot to offer an oenophile, too, but they are more focused on the wines of the West Coast than the entire world. How much more did Chicago have to offer wine-wise? I decided to take a whirlwind three-day tour of the toddlin' town.

I always make a point to stop at Binny's, a 22-store chain with stores all over greater Chicago. There's no retail equivalent to Binny's in New York—or anywhere else that I've been, for that matter. Binny's prices are excellent, its selection remarkably broad if not enormous, from Yellow Tail to grand cru Burgundy and everything in between. Its vast store in Lincoln Park is billed as "the largest wine shop in the country."

The only thing that could use some improvement at Binny's is its service: I wandered down the Lincoln Park aisles, checking out the Chablis and Champagne and the wall of half bottles, and it was almost half an hour before a sales associate asked if I was "finding everything" (my hands and basket were both empty).



There are other Chicago wine stores where the staff is much more attentive. At Glunz House of Fine Wines, founded in 1888, Barbara Glunz herself unlocked the door. Ms. Glunz showed me around her slightly dusty shop and the back room where the wines were kept, along with a handwritten cellar book that detailed available vintages of old (and older) Bordeaux, including a bottle of 1982 LaFleur for \$1,250—about \$500 less than it cost at auction recently.

About 20 miles north, Knights-

prices. For example, at the Breslin we had a bottle of the excellent Ruinart Blanc de Blancs Champagne for \$69—its retail price and almost half what it would be on a list in New York.

I also found excellent prices and cool choices at Webster's Wine Bar, a Chicago stalwart whose owner is planning to open a second place soon. The Webster wine list looked like a high-schooler's notebook and was filled with all kinds of eclectic options and deals. There was a Menetou-Salon, aka Poor Man's Sancerre, from my favorite

do," according to wine director Joe Catterson. Scott had the slightly more expensive "reserve" pairing.

Because the meal was so spectacularly theatrical (a piece of beef stuck on a nail in a bed of eucalyptus leaves was just one example), I almost forgot to pay attention to the wines, though I did note that very small portions of eight wines were poured. "We don't want anyone getting drunk," our sommelier explained.

The wines were pretty good—the Pierre Gimmonet Brut Champagne, the Niepoort Redoma Branco, an excellent white wine from Portugal and the 2006 Cedar Knoll Napa Cabernet—though several cost less than \$35 a bottle. I called Mr. Catterson a few days later to ask how he made his selections, and he explained that he tasted many wines and found that "really complex food works better with less complex wines." And apparently, with cheaper wines, too.

At the end of my three-day trip, I wasn't ready to echo Mr. Hart's assertion that Chicago beat out New York (though in the dollar department, Alinea did beat out just about every New York restaurant I've patronized). But the city, in my opinion, held onto its spot as the second-best wine scene in America. And Mr. Sandburg's challenge—"Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning"—seemed just as apt as ever.

► Read the On Wine blog at blogs.wsj.com/wine. Email Lettie at wine@wsj.com.

It's no New York, but Chicago offers gentle prices and great choices at its wine stores and restaurants.

bridge Wines in suburban Northbrook is a veritable Mecca for Burgundy lovers. Many top collectors buy their wines here, and as an added bonus partner Kevin Mohalley is always happy to open bottles for free tastings, mostly on Saturdays. So are his customers, who show up at Knights-bridge on Saturday mornings with their own great bottles to share.

Many of these collectors patronize Chicago neighborhood hot spots like Blackbird and the Breslin, where they're allowed to bring their own special bottles. Chicago is a very BYO-friendly town—an important factor in a top wine city, though alas, that's not the case with New York.

But many collectors happily order off local wine lists, too, because there are lots of great wines at great

OENOFILE

Five great wines to try in Chicago—or anywhere else. Prices are retail.



Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blancs Brut Champagne, \$60

Founded in 1729, Dom Ruinart is the oldest house in Champagne and a specialist in Blanc de Blancs (Chardonnay) wines, although it also happens to make a very good rosé. The house produces wonderfully rich, truly elegant Champagnes. This one is served at Chicago restaurant the Breslin.



2009 Niepoort Redoma Branco, \$24

Although the Niepoort name is most closely associated with Port, there are also a number of first-rate Niepoort table reds and whites, most notably this intense white with notes of citrus and minerals, made from grapes few people have likely heard of before (including Rabigato and Codega). Find it at Chicago's Alinea.



2008 Foradori Teroldego Rotaiiano, \$22

Elisabetta Foradori is pretty much the queen of Teroldego, a red Syrah-like Italian grape that grows to wonderful effect in northern Italy. It's a soft, lush red with beguiling aromas of earth and spice. At Chicago's Balsan restaurant I had the 2006 Teroldego, which was a bit bigger and more structured, but the 2008 is the vintage currently available in stores.



2009 Domaine de Chatenay Menetou-Salon, \$20

It's sometimes called "Poor Man's Sancerre," but this Menetou-Salon (a town very close to Sancerre, where Sauvignon Blanc is also the chief grape) can stand on its own merits. It's a zippy, citrusy white and a perfect summer wine. I tried it at Webster's Wine Bar.



Cesarni Sforza Tridentum Brut Rosé, \$20

There aren't many sparkling Italian rosés that might be described as "complex," but this rosé from the Trentino region would certainly qualify. Made from Pinot Nero (aka Pinot Noir), it's a lively but subtle rosé with a long finish. I had a glass at the Purple Pig, a newish wine bar on North Michigan Avenue.