

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY [JOEL M. FISHER](#)



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Most people *leave* New York City in the late summer, fleeing the muggy heat for cooler destinations. I, however, bucked the trend and went to visit Manhattan for the first time in decades. To call the city changed since the 70s would be an understatement.



My Son Matt with tie, and W.R. Tish

The trip was mostly about family and friends, but I snuck in one wine-centric dinner at celeb-chef Mario Batali's [Otto](#). This Washington Square hotspot is split into a pizzeria and enoteca (wine bar). There I dined with W.R. Tish, friend and former editor of *Wine Enthusiast*, and my son Matt Fisher.

Otto focuses on affordable wines from all 21 regions in Italy, and has a wine list showcasing more than 700 bottles. The restaurant offers traditional Italian “quartinos” – or approximately one-third of a bottle – in order to encourage customers to try new wines or craft tasting flights. The sommelier is there to help, but the restaurant goes out of its way to cultivate a low-pressure, low-pretension attitude to wine. It must be working: the place was mobbed.

While nibbling on assorted elegant pizzas and a fresh arugula salad drizzled with lemon

juice, we sampled some memorable reds. Among our favorites were a *1995 Vino Nobile de Montepuciano Villa St. Anno* (\$45), a *2000 Triacco Sforzato* (\$59) and a *1988 Barbera, Marrone Bruno Verdi* (\$42). I was particularly happy to discover that the Montepuciano had managed to mellow nicely without losing its fresh fruit tones or complex tannic structure.

It was a fun night, filled with good-natured, opinionated squabbles over the wine. I highly recommend checking Otto and its wine list out if the opportunity arises.

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I recently attended a “Best of Our Current Spanish Wine” tasting at [The Wine House](#) in West L.A. The selected wines were an interesting assortment. Some lived up to the event's name, some did not. While 17 of us nibbled cheese and chorizo, the Wine House’s Lance Montalto led us through the evening.

We started with a [2003 Cortijo III Rioja](#) (\$8). This bottle is a 100% Tempranillo, and displayed characteristic clear garnet colors and cherry fruit on the nose. I thought this a great ‘pizza red’, and decent, accessible wine perfect for a casual Friday dinner. Next was a [2001 Rioja from Remelluri](#) (\$25). Bordeaux in style, this Tempranillo and Grenache blend started herbaceous but opened up nicely into deeper berry tones.

Then came [Buil & Giné’s 2003 Toro ‘Buil’](#) (\$29). This darkly wound and darkly colored wine comes from a Tempranillo clone. It showed good tannins, a nice finish, and spiced fruit on the tongue. We immediately moved to another *Toro*, this one a 2002 from **Bodegas Pintia (\$45.99)**. Made from 45-year-old vines, this bottle showed high alcohol. A rich nose of spices, tobacco and fruit was well matched by a robust, balanced taste. I quite liked this bottle.

We took a step back from the heavy reds and tasted a pleasant quaffing wine that was easily drinkable. The *2004 Antonio Candela e Hijos “Barahonda” Yecla* (\$10) had pleasant notes of cherry, raisin, cinnamon and floral. This bottle came from 60-year-old vines from the Antonio Candela vineyard, which produces a mere 4,200 cases a year.

Next came a *2002 El Nido “Clio”* from [Jumilla](#) (\$40). Not that price and quality always move in tandem, but this well-structured and elegant wine was a large step forward from the previous bottle we tasted. The Clio showed good berry elements warmed by spices and even coconut that comes from being aged in American Oak barrels.

We moved on to a rich, dark **Bodegas Ato Moncays’ 2002 “Aquilon” Campo de Borja** (\$130) Smooth and spicy, I though the wine ran a bit hot. It would hold its own well against strong food dishes. The 100% Tempranillo [Ribera del Duero 2001 Hacienda Monistario](#) (\$33) makes for a rewarding drink now, but could age easily for another 15 years.

We wrapped up the evening on two high notes. We had the fortune of sampling one of the greatest Spanish wines, **Bodegas Vega-Sicilia “Unico” 1994 Ribera del Duero**

(\$299). A rich, classic red, this bottle possessed a deep aroma of oak, spice and fruit. The finish was tannic yet elegant. I was a bit surprised that this wine wasn't as strong as I expected it to be, but it should gain 'pow' over time. This wine could cellar for a further 30 years. And last but not least, we concluded with a dessert wine – a ***Bodegas Olivaries S.L. Jumilla “Dulce Monastrell”*** (\$24). Sweet but not cloying, this port-like wine had wonderful fig and vanilla notes.

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I'll wrap up by saying that it was good to see so many column-readers at our WineVineandDine's recent Italian wine-tasting dinner at [Ca` del Sole](#) in North Hollywood. The venue, food, wine and company were all enchanting that night. I hope to see more of you at our upcoming events.

As always, happy drinking!

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