

BAR BITES

Ottimista Enoteca

Jon Bonne

Thursday, February 8, 2007



A clean, well-lit place for a glass of wine and a quick bite isn't exactly a common sight around

Lombard Street. It's what Melissa Gisler, entranced by the local enotecas during a stint at cooking school in Rome, wanted to bring home to her longtime Cow Hollow neighborhood. The result was Ottimista, which opened in 2005, merging a Marina vibe with the basic pleasures of an Italian wine bar. "I'm done with the bar scene," says Gisler, "and I felt like a lot of my friends in their early 30s were, too." Ottimista means "optimist" in Italian, a reflection of the breezy, pan-Italian approach to the menu and wine list. It's one that surely will resonate with Gisler's neighbors, even if the buzzy weekend crowd keeps the "bar" in "wine bar."

The vibe: Rustic beams, ocher-colored stucco walls and a painted mural of a certain boot-shaped country telegraph the aesthetic. It falls somewhere between rural Tuscan village and well-worn Roman joint. Copies of Joyce Goldstein's "Enoteca" are stacked behind the bar, just to drive the point home.

The crowd: Definitely a magnet for Marina beautiful people, with a pleasingly civilized spin.

Best seat: The sidewalk tables in warm weather. Otherwise, the bar, where you'll get the best view of the chalkboard that lists Ottimista's choosily picked wines. Just make sure to sit back from the open front door, which can lend a chill.

Killer apps: Graze on wine-friendly small items like saffron arancini (fried rice balls) stuffed with fontina (\$6), a trio of extra-crisp crostini (\$6) or salumi plate (\$10/\$16), or tuck into the daily pizza special (\$12), which recently was topped with a pulled pork "sugo." If you're still hungry, the all-day menu offers bigger dishes like a brined, grilled pork chop with a gnocchi-Brussels sprouts hash (\$17).

Signature drink: Wine is the way to go here, with 30 by the glass. The top picks tilt toward northern Italy; they're adventuresome but not too intimidating. Consider the 2004 Tocai Friuliano white from Scarbolo (\$7) or a 2005 St. Magdalener red (\$8) that hails from the Alto Adige region. A full bottle list is available. Bypass the flights.

Also on tap: A full bar and beer offerings are available for those not down with the enoteca vibe.

Bonus: A full brunch menu, served from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. on weekends, adds an Italian twist to the usual

eggs-and-toast approach. Ricotta doughnuts in nutmeg sugar, anyone?

Vitals: 1838 Union St. (between Laguna and Octavia), San Francisco; (415) 674-8400. 2-11 p.m.
Tues.-Thurs., noon-2 a.m. Fri., 11 a.m.-2 a.m. Sat., 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sun.

Jon Bonne, jbonne@sfchronicle.com