

Approaching the Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza church, in central Rome. *Opposite:* Inside Enoteca Il Piccolo, a wine bar near the Piazza Navona.



IN VINO

Photographs by



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VERITAS

Rome's restaurants may be legendary, but sometimes what you need is a great wine bar. **Ray Isle** takes a tour of the city's finest *enoteche*, from the old-school to the cutting-edge.

A GOOD WINE BAR CAN PROVIDE THE ANSWERS TO MANY VITAL QUESTIONS.

For instance, after my wife, Cecily, and I dropped off our daughter, Marie, at her dorm in Rome in the summer of 2022, because she had decided that going to college in the Eternal City seemed more appealing than doing the same in Newark, Delaware—go figure—we wandered aimlessly in the August heat for a span of time, then found ourselves sitting, somewhat emotionally unmoored, at a tiny wine bar near the Piazza Navona. Having your only child leave home is a weird experience. “What do we do now?” my wife asked me. The question pertained pretty much to our entire lives, but all I could think of to say was, “Have a glass of wine, I guess?”

Enoteca Il Piccolo (small plates \$5–\$16), happened upon in that odd moment, has become one of my favorite Roman wine bars. I’ve since discovered that it’s a favorite of many friends in the wine business as well, both for its selection of primarily (but not solely) natural wines from small producers and for its unreconstructed, untouristy, deeply Roman vibe. The inside is tiny, dark, and cozy; outdoors there are mismatched tables where, if the temperature is not nine million degrees as it was when we went back this past summer, you can sit amid a mix of guests, half of whom seem to have come out of a 1950s black-and-white Italian film and half of whom are decidedly younger. Have some bruschetta, some mortadella, some olives. Pick a glass from the short list, or a bottle from the wall inside (the inventory is wide-ranging, both Italian and international). Figure out your life.

The truth is that in Rome, wine bars—or *enoteche*—can be almost anything: old-school places like Il Piccolo, with its simple menu of salumi, bruschetta, and panini; places that are more restaurant-y yet still traditional; and places that amp



up the ambition of the food substantially while still serving small plates designed to go with wine. My cookbook-writer friend Katie Parla, who has lived in Rome for years, described the latter trend: “The *enoteca* used to be where you had a glass of wine or maybe a grappa, and maybe a bite with your friends, and that was it. Now, more and more, you see these *enoteche* run by groups of young people who’ve either trained abroad or have a kind of awareness that you can have real cuisine at a wine bar.”

For me, the exemplar of this movement is **RetroBottega** (entrées \$21–\$38), one of the hottest spots in Rome. A 10-minute walk or so from Il Piccolo, it’s an entirely different experience—and yet, also not. Despite its setting in a 16th-century town house, the design is distinctly modern: black barstools, blond wood, moody lighting. The ever-changing menu from chef-owners Giuseppe Lo Iudice and Alessandro Mocchi is hyper-seasonal—on Mondays, when the place is closed, the staff often takes foraging trips to Lazio or Abruzzo. When I was there last, I was blown away by their *spaghetti verde, aglio, pecorino e peperoncino*. It’s a plate of brilliant green pasta (wild spinach and



Clockwise from far left: Latteria Trastevere, a natural-wine haven; wine director Maurizio Paparello (left) with Maria Elena Roscioli and Alessandro Roscioli at Salumeria Roscioli; cured meats and cheeses are kept under the bar at Latteria Trastevere; a portion of Il Piccolo's wine collection; St. Peter's Basilica, with the river Tiber in the foreground.



green garlic shoots are used in the dough) adorned simply with thin slices of vivid red peperoncino and liberal amounts of grated pecorino. A glass of Greco di Tufo from the cult Campanian producer Quintodecimo was a stellar accompaniment. But any number of wines from the extensive list would have worked just as well. As Livia Alyson Careaga, a Rome resident who handles the Italian portfolio of an American wine importer, said, "The team cherishes the idea that you're there to try something new, to try a special glass, even if the occasion is simply to meet up with friends and have a beautiful wine together."



RetroBottega, known for seasonal dishes paired with small-producer wines, in the Centro Storico neighborhood.

VINO / CAFFÈ





From top: Salumeria Roscioli's deli counter, which sells 150 types of cured meat; grilled octopus at Latteria Trastevere; a toast on the Bio Hotel Raphaël terrace.



IF YOU'RE A NATURAL-WINE aficionado, head across the river to Trastevere. Skip the student bars, which are jammed with revelers, and make a beeline instead to **Latteria Trastevere** (small plates \$3–\$27). I'll quote Katie Parla again on this one, since it's where we met for a drink the last time I saw her. "I mostly hate drinking in Trastevere," she told me, "but Latteria has one of the greatest wine lists in the city, and it's sitting there in plain sight among a bunch of tourist traps."

The best thing to do is snag a wooden table outside, order something refreshing—I had a glass of Grillo from the Sicilian organic producer Masseria del Feudo—and accompany it with some of the cheeses that owner Antonio Cossu brings in from Sardinia, where he grew up. Add some beef tartare and (miracle of miracles, because they're bizarrely rare in Italy) a fresh green salad, and you will achieve happiness. Parla said, "You can come here for a quick *aperitivo*, and before you know it you've hunkered down and are spending the whole night." I can attest that this is true.

Back near Campo de' Fiori, **L'Angolo Divino** (small plates \$8–\$27) is another do-not-miss. Owner Massimo Crippa's

encyclopedic knowledge of wine is manifested in his bar's similarly encyclopedic list, which ranges from obscure low-intervention bottlings to classics and sought-after rarities. Inside, the old wooden-beam ceiling and brick walls make it feel like a historic wine cellar, and in some ways it is. Crippa's grandfather founded the business in 1946 as a classic *vino e oli*—a place you'd go to fill jugs with olive oil and wine for the week. "These were very Roman places, a very old tradition," Crippa said.

The last time I was at L'Angolo Divino, Crippa poured me three different orange wines—my favorite was a Barraco Altomere Grillo from Sicily—which I drank with a bowl of olives, some mortadella, and some fresh farmer's cheese. I asked Crippa about the bar's name. "Well, it's really because we're located on a corner, at an angle of the streets," he said. "But I also like the word *divine*, because wine is cultural, it's religious, and it goes back to the time of Jesus Christ. I like to think people come here and feel a little of that. On the other hand, a lot of people just think my name must be Angelo."





Clockwise from top left: The courtyard of Hotel de Russie, a Rocco Forte Hotel; L'Angolo Divino owner Massimo Crippa pouring a glass; Via di Porta Settimiana, near Latteria Trastevere.

WHEN I ASKED MY FRIEND Federico de Cesare Viola, the editor of the Italian edition of *Food & Wine*, how to define a Roman wine bar, he laughed. “In a way, there isn’t a definition—for Rome, almost anywhere can be a wine bar if you decide it is.” This seems to me a distinctly Italian way of defining something: driving in Italy, for instance, is simply using a vehicle to get from point A to point B; whether streets or laws or speed limits are involved is purely a personal choice.

In that spirit, I have to add **Salumeria Roscioli** (small plates \$16–\$32) to my favorites list. Among other things, it has the distinction of being the only place that’s been recommended to me by both wine professionals and poets (I can’t count the number of sommeliers I know who rave about it, honestly; the poet, though, was the late Mark Strand, who got there long before any of the wine experts).

Salumeria Roscioli exists in a nebulous realm somewhere between a shop full of amazing artisanal salumi and cheeses, a wine bar, and a full-on restaurant. (In recent years it's also been discovered by many, many people, so definitely make a reservation well in advance.) The food is sublime, particularly the pastas: the oxtail ravioli and the *cacio e pepe* aren't to be missed, but first get an order of the house-made *salame rosa*, an old-school version of mortadella, with pickled vegetables to snack on while you peruse wine director Maurizio Paparello's massive, two-volume wine list. There are hundreds of choices, but if it's in stock, snag a bottle of Stella di Campalto's ethereal Rosso di Montalcino (or her even more alluring Brunello, if

money is no object). Keep in mind that there is also **Rimessa Roscioli**, a few blocks away (very wine-centric as well), the excellent (and endlessly Instagrammable) *maritozzi* pastries at the next-door **Roscioli Caffè**, and the family's original bakery (source point for all this) right around the corner. Oh, and the newly opened **Roscioli R-House** (from \$217), in Trastevere, which is essentially a one-room hotel, or a short-stay apartment, or, as this is Italy, whatever you decide to call it. Either way, it's a totally charming non-hotel hotel option for those needing a place to sleep.





Clockwise from left: Remnants of an ancient temple at the Roman Forum; co-owner Giuseppe Lo Iudice checking bottle temperatures at RetroBottega; the Bio Hotel Raphaël, in the Navona district; dessert at Salumeria Roscioli.



selection of organic and biodynamic wines in the restaurant and bar. Anna Spanu, the young sommelier who runs the program, is an excellent guide. At her suggestion, we had a bottle of Sergio Mottura's lovely Poggio della Costa white from Umbria. That was followed with a glass of an even more elusive dessert wine: Buca delle Canne, from the natural wine producer La Stoppa. With its amber sweetness, it was a fine thing to sip while looking out over the Roman rooftops. Twelve months had passed since that moment when, suddenly aware that our only child had left home, my wife and I sat at Il Piccolo wondering what on earth to do with ourselves. Everything was different now; and yet here we were, a family together, just the same. 🌐

DON'T DISCOUNT hotel bars while in Rome, either. First—I'll admit it—sometimes the desire for a great cocktail wins out over the need for wine. In those instances, you'd be remiss not heading to the fairly fabulous **Stravinskij Bar**, in the oasis-like courtyard of the **Hotel de Russie**, a **Rocco Forte Hotel** (doubles from \$1,248). The hotel is just off the Piazza del Popolo, which typically means mobs of visitors; at Stravinskij, though, you are serenely unaware of the madding crowds, a sensation not in the least lessened by the bar's Roman G&T, accented with celery shrub, sage, and black pepper.

But for wine, and some of the most stunning sunset views in the city, head to the **Mater Terrae Bistrot Bar** on top of the **Bio Hotel Raphaël** (doubles from \$295), a Relais & Châteaux property in the historic center where my wife and I took our daughter for a drink, a year after dropping her off at school that first summer. She was about to start her sophomore year, sharing an apartment with friends and embracing life as a student in Rome.

As the name suggests, Bio Hotel Raphaël is focused on organic cultivation, from its vine-covered façade to the vegetarian and vegan menus and the

