

Raising the Bar

Sipping a good glass of wine is pleasant enough in the simplest of settings, but exciting and exotic set-ups can turn the event into a lasting memory.

Read on for **Carol Wright's** picks of wine bars around the world that aren't just counters and racks of bottles, but dramatic destinations in their own right

It's not just the bubbles that rise at the year-old **Perching Bar** in Arboxygene Park, 15 minutes from Reims in France. The whole Champagne bar rises five and a half metres above ground in the most glamorous of tree-houses. Getting to the bar is a ten-minute walk up three gently inclined suspension bridges through a lovely forest. Some seating may be in the form of swings, but this bar on stilts is no Tarzan endurance spot. Designed by Germaine Morisseau, it has comfortable layered wood and white leather chairs – ideal for lounging and taking in the gorgeous views of the Champagne region by day and the illuminated treetops by night. There's an entrance charge of \$22, but that includes a glass of Champagne from a selection that represents both major and smaller local houses.

UK The longest Champagne bar in Europe – all 95.8 metres of it – is located at London's St Pancras station. Under a vast Victorian iron canopy, the bar sits alongside the platform from which Eurostar departs. Though in winter the station temperature keeps the Champagne nicely cool, drinkers benefit from individually controlled heated leather seats in booths that take up to six people. With 20 varieties of Champagne available by the glass and an



The Planet Bar at the Mount Nelson hotel, Cape Town

expert sommelier, the place has become a popular after-work meeting place.

USA The St Pancras bar remains static, but for those who like to sample wine on the move there is the Napa Valley Wine Train in California – unique in an area rich in wine bars. In a hundred-year-old Pullman rail car, a tutored tasting can be enjoyed while passing slowly through the vineyards. The bar offers 40–60 bottles to taste, including such favourites as Zinfandel blend 2008 Magnums and the Benessere Sangiovese. It costs \$10 for a flight of four wines, which can be chosen

by the “wine educator” on board or by the taster, and can range from sparkling wines to Ports and late-harvest wines. Lunch or afternoon tea can be taken on the train coupled with a visit to the wine-bar carriage. The trip can also include tours of wineries in its packages.

UK There are a number of underground wine cellars that offer tastings, but for a truly historic experience one should visit the 380-year-old stone vaulted Wine Cellars beneath the Stafford Hotel in London. The cellars were built in the 17th century by Lord Francis Godolphin below a courtyard that later became part of the Royal Mews. In the 1880s, they became the property of a private London wine merchant whose shingle still hangs there. During World War II the cellars became an

air-raid shelter and were kept open at Churchill's request. A display of wartime memorabilia fills one end. The rest holds 18,000–20,000 bottles including rare vintages. Private lunches, dinners and wine tastings are held here. Email privatedining.london@kempinski.com for details.

Overseeing it all is Gino Nardella, one of the UK's few master sommeliers. The best way to experience the wine in the cellars is to ask Gino for guidance on which wines to choose with a meal in the restaurant. Otherwise just sit by candlelight among the arches and bottles, and enjoy tasting in the quiet, surrounded by one of the most complete wine collections in London and one of the widest ranges of vintages in half bottles and imperial sizes. Tasting is tailored to individual preferences, and can be formal or informal, for beginners or advanced palates, by country, region or grape. Special lighting and temperature controls bring out the wine's true qualities.

MALDIVES Being underground with vintage wines is one thing, but being underwater and eyeballing fish at a wine bar is something else. The Wine Cellar at the Conrad Maldives Rangali Island is two metres below sea level and electronically cooled to the correct temperature. It contains 17,000 bottles from 1,450 different labels. The resident sommelier and Master of Wine, Ron Giorgiou, will guide wine buffs along an interactive journey to the best of Old and New World wine regions visually aided by individual video screens. The adjacent cheese and wine bar enables the two tastes to be paired.



Undersea wine cellar, Conrad Maldives Rangali Island

SOUTH AFRICA From looking down into the ocean to looking up to the heavens, stargazing is part of the wine experience at the **Planet Bar** at Cape Town's Mount Nelson hotel. It is especially memorable in winter as you find yourself seated by the fireplace sipping Champagne or local wines, and looking up to a twinkling fibre-optic ceiling representing the Milky Way and stars of the Southern Hemisphere. The bar opens on to a terrace where one can soak in the real night sky as one drinks. In the centre of the bar is a huge orrery – a clockwork mobile demonstrating the relative positions and motions of bodies in the solar system. The entrance includes a walkway of intricate Swarovski-crystal tiling carpeted with a map of the constellations. The décor mixes mink and taupe velvets, satin and pearlized leather, 1940s'-style Murano glass wall sconces and a bar of underlit onyx with bar stools backed with a portrait of Lord Nelson.

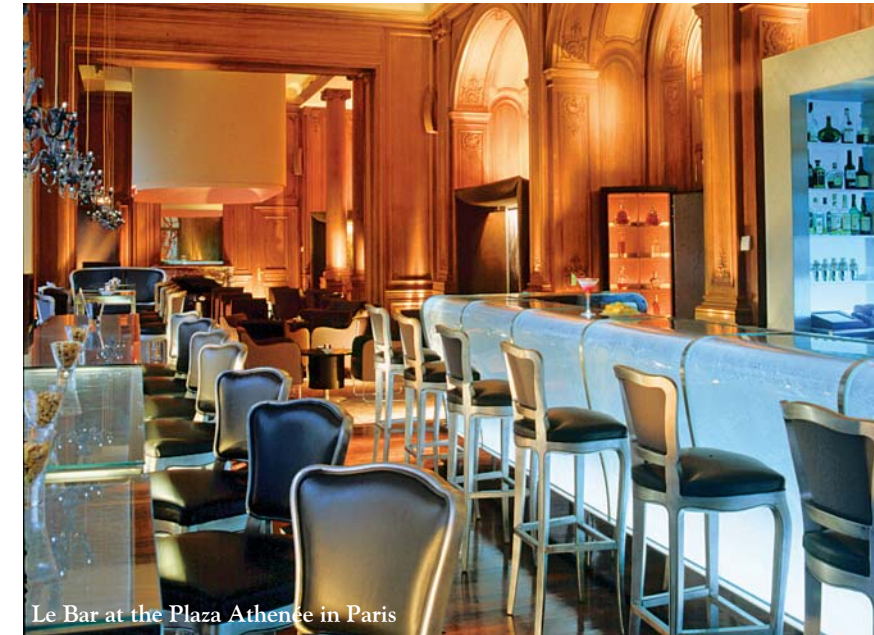


Above: The Monvínic Bar. Opposite page, left: Master Sommelier Gino Nardella of the Stafford's Wine Cellars in London

SPAIN The Monvínic in Barcelona has been called the best wine bar in the world. Towards the end of the legendary Las Ramblas, the bar has a slick modern interior designed by **Alfons Tost** where wine has centre stage. With an extensive library of wine-related books, magazines, documents and auction catalogues, the bar's mission is to be "the international benchmark for the dissemination of wine culture". In the wine bar, the guest is handed an iPad-like gadget to browse, which contains the whole wine list from various regions around the world with plentiful extra information such as grape varieties and producers. Sixty wines are offered by the glass and the bar has a wide collection of Domaine Romanée-Conti and Château d'Yquem. The digital wine list has been developed and updated by the bar's team of six sommeliers headed by Frenchwoman Isabelle Brunet, who was sommelier at El Bulli, and Cesar Canovas, who was three times winner of Spain's best sommelier award.

USA Across the pond in New York, a secret place to sip wines by the glass or sample a classic cocktail is Campbell's Apartment, snuggled into a corner of Grand Central station. Its name is misleading; it was never an apartment to live or sleep in, but the office of millionaire financier John Campbell who had the place built in 1923. The size of a chapel (it even has stained glass windows) and built in the style of a galleried hall of a 13th-century Florentine palace, he filled it with the world's largest Persian rug and constructed a

The cellar of the Monvínic Bar in Barcelona



Le Bar at the Plaza Athénée in Paris

THE MONVÍNIC IN BARCELONA WITH ITS SLICK MODERN INTERIOR DESIGNED BY ALFONS TOST HAS BEEN CALLED THE BEST WINE BAR IN THE WORLD



vast stone fireplace in which his steel safe now stands. He also added a pipe organ and piano to entertain friends to concerts in the evening. After Campbell died in 1957, the place became variously a storage place for the station guards' weapons and a small jail, until it was rediscovered in 1999 and turned into a comfortable drinking spot with huge sofas and armchairs. The present owner hired London interior designer Nina Campbell (no relation) to give it a more dramatic red-accented renovation, which was installed in only 12 hours so that business went on uninterrupted.

FRANCE And finally, the place to see and be seen in: Le Bar at the Plaza Athénée in Paris, noted for its Fashion Week parties and colour changes. The dramatic glass bar is lit in blue for evening drinking, and late on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights it changes to a vibrant red to complement the electro-rock music emerging from the speakers. Designed by a protégée of Philippe Starck, the space is divided into two areas: the long illuminated bar of sandblasted glass resembling an iceberg and flanked with Louis XV-style elongated metallic stools and tables; and the cosy, sexy lounge area complete with leather armchairs on a huge tufted rug and 17th century paintings with frames large enough for drinkers to sit inside and become part of the artwork – literally putting oneself in the picture! ♦

The longest Champagne bar, at London's St Pancras Station