

has a good shot at staying in the limelight. 5:30-9pm Tue-Thu and 5:30-9:30pm Fri-Sat. 938 Villa St. 650.964.7466.

Don Giovanni Italian. \$\$\$\$. This pumpkin-hued eatery faces the bustling downtown with a handsome demeanor of mahogany and candlelight. Full bar. V, MC. 235 Castro St. 650.961.9749.

Maru Ichi Japanese noodles. \$. Maru Ichi is a true noodle shop. While there are a few appetizers on the menu, the slurpable house-made noodles—ramen, soba and udon—are what you want. Go for the house specialty kuro ramen or the soy sauce ramen. Beer and wine. Cash only. 368 Castro St. 650.564.9931.

Nami Nami Japanese. \$\$\$\$. Nami Nami specializes in kappo-style Japanese food, food prepared in the artful, labor-intensive, seasonally driven style associated with the city of Kyoto. For diners willing to open their minds and mouths, it offers one of the most exciting restaurant experiences in the Bay Area. 11:30am-2pm Tue-Sun, 6-10pm Tue-Thu and 6-11pm Fri-Sat. 240 Castro St. 650.964.6990.

Neto Caffe and Bakery Cafe. \$. Neto Caffe and Bakery is a busy, good-looking space that has a happy buzz about it. The first thing you notice as you walk in is all the fresh pastries on the counter. There's a little bit of everything including a number of Middle Eastern specialties. 6am-2am daily. 135 Castro St. 650.625.9888.

Rose International Market Persian. \$. Part Middle Eastern grocery store, part Persian food take-out counter and part kebab grill, Rose International Market is a gold mine of good food. The white plastic tables out front are packed with customers eating the market's signature mesquite-grilled kebabs. 1060 Castro St. 650.960.1900.

The Spice Islands Cafe Singaporean, Malaysian, Indonesian. \$. This restaurant will send your taste buds to the tropics. Talented chefs put out dishes full of spice and passion, like jumbo chile prawns, papaya salad and Malaysian spareribs. The menu is expansive. Prices are reasonable. 210 Hope St. 650.961.0628.

Taquería Los Charros Mexican. \$. This clean and fetching diner is the place for authentic fare. Generous portions. Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. 854 W. Dana St. 650.969.1464.

Vaso Azzurro Ristorante Italian. \$\$\$\$. Entrees are attractively presented, and the waiters will make you feel as though you were the most important guests in the place. Dessert lives up to the rest of the meal. Beer, wine. 108 Castro St. 650.940.1717.

Xanh Restaurant Modern Vietnamese. \$. Xanh (pronounced "zahn") epitomizes the new breed of upscale, contemporary Vietnamese restaurant. The appealing menu ranges from the traditional to the unconventional and includes rolls, salads, noodles, small plates and full-size entrees. 11:30am-2pm and dinner 5pm-close Mon-Fri. 110 Castro St. 650.964.1888

PALO ALTO

 =book online at paloalto.net

Bella Luna Ristorante Italiano Italian. \$\$\$\$. Sunny Tuscan hues saturate the interior, and the dishes of this downtown Palo Alto restaurant create a delicious illusion of dining in Italy on food prepared by Italian chefs. Beer and wine served. 233 University Ave. 650.322.1846.

Bistro Elan California French. \$\$\$\$. The only problem with the menu is that it's all tempting. Using seasonal produce, the chef allows flavors to speak for themselves. Wine, beer. Closed Sun-Mon. 448 California Ave. 650.327.0284.

Cafe Brioche Southern French. \$\$\$. Mediterranean magic: exceptional cuisine on oversize plates is whisked to tables as soon as it's created. 445 California Ave. 650.326.8640.

new Calafia Cafe and Market A Go-Go Eclectic. \$\$\$. Calafia Cafe and Market A Go-Go combines elements of the fast-food world and the labor-intensive slow cooking of more-high-end restaurants. Chef and owner Charlie Ayers (who was Google's first chef) calls his concept "slow food fast"—good-to-eat and good-for-you food that he hopes will appeal to Silicon Valley's frenetic, too-busy-to-eat pace of life. Look for good burgers, pizza, salads, and fresh fish. 11am-10pm weekdays; brunch starting at 9am Sat-Sun. 858 El Camino Real. 650.322.9200.

Coupa Cafe Venezuelan. \$\$\$. Venezuela is best known for its oil production and resilient populist

president; Coupa shines attention on the country's premium coffee and chocolate. The beautiful storefront also serves excellent arepas, white corn griddle cakes stuffed with various fillings. 538 Ramona St. 650.322.6872.

Elbe Germania. \$\$\$. Named for the third-longest river in Europe, Elbe adjoins Rudy's and hence hosts a boisterous next-door bar crowd. Bratwurst, Polish sausage, sauerkraut, venison. Don't miss "Bill and his magical accordion" on Fri-Sat. Open daily. 117 University Ave. 650.321.3319.

Empire Grill & Tap Room California grill. \$\$\$. Waiters with charm to spare, an energetic clientele and a menu packed with grilled, roasted and smoked intensity make Empire Grill much more than simply a smart place to sip a cosmopolitan. Full bar. 651 Emerson St. 650.321.3030.

Green Elephant Gourmet. \$\$\$. Burmese. Burmese food draws influences from its three largest neighbors: China, India and Thailand. Standouts here include the coconut chicken soup, tangy tea leaf salad and refreshing glass noodle salad. Lunch 11am-2:30pm, dinner 4:30-9pm daily. 3950 Middlefield Rd (Charleston Shopping Center). 650.494.7391.

Gyros Gyros Mediterranean. \$. The lunch crowd turns out in force to grapple with the oversize, and messy, lamb and beef gyros, chicken gyros and other treats. That's especially true on sunny afternoons, when the sidewalk tables fill with folks downing the juicy sandwiches. 11am-11pm daily. 498 University Ave. 650.327.0107.

Junnoon Contemporary Indian. \$\$\$\$. This attractive Palo Alto restaurant serves eclectic modern Indian food, the kind you might get at an upscale restaurant in Bangalore or Mumbai. You could easily make a meal from the great selection of appetizers. 11:30am-2:30pm and 5:30-10pm Mon-Fri, 5:30-10:30pm Sat. 150 University Ave. 650.329.9644.

Lavanda Mediterranean Grill \$\$\$\$. This urban grill at the top of University Avenue offers eclectic small tasting plates, along with heartier fare such as roasted sea bass with chanterelle mushrooms and guinea fowl with sautéed chard. 185 University (at Emerson). 650.321.3514.

Mantra French, American and Indian. \$\$\$\$. Mantra serves inventive French and American food that speaks with an Indian accent. It isn't fusion, but a more subtle blend of surprisingly compatible flavors and techniques. Lunch 11:30am-2:30pm Mon-Sat, dinner 5:30-10pm Sun-Thu and 5:30-10:30pm Fri-Sat, Sun brunch 10am-2:30pm. 632-636 Emerson St. 650.322.3500.

new Mayfield Bakery and Café American. \$\$\$\$. With its simple but handsome décor, open kitchen fronted by a long counter and tidy stacks of split almond logs tucked against the wall for the great smelling wood-burning oven, Mayfield Bakery and Café presents updated versions of seasonally driven Mediterranean and American classics—big, bold, rustic flavors and simple preparations that aim to let locally grown ingredients speak for themselves without any undue manipulation or pretense. You know the stuff: Niman Ranch burgers, spit-roasted meats, frisée salads with crumbled bacon and a poached egg on top, pizzas, grilled fish, crusty, fresh bread and hearty, satisfying desserts. 11:30am-4pm and 5-9pm Mon-Fri; 9am-4pm and 5-9pm Sat-Sun. 855 El Camino Real. 650.853.9200.

new Reposado Mexican. \$\$\$\$. Reposado offers modern, refined Mexican food served in a lively setting. The restaurant is easily one of Palo Alto's most striking. The soaring, exposed beam ceilings make the dining room feel at once industrial and inviting because of the warm colors, wood accents and dramatic light fixtures. There's a beautiful bar and cozy booth seating on one side and spacious table and banquette seating on the other. Great selection of tequila. 11:30am-10pm Mon-Thu, 11:30am-11pm Fri-Sat and 11:30am-9pm Sun. 236 Hamilton Ave. 650.833.3151.

Tamarine New Vietnamese. \$\$\$\$. A mesmerizing back bar of natural bamboo and glass sleekly adjoins a wall showcasing original artwork. Even the waitstaff is sleek, clad in Prada black. Entrees are gorgeous, and deeply aromatic. 546 University Ave. 650.325.8500.

new Three Seasons Modern Vietnamese. \$\$\$\$. Much of the menu is familiar, but the food at Three Seasons scores because of its superior execution and light touch. A cool, two-level dining room dominated by a striking circular stained glass ceiling and an ornate wooden bar that serves great cocktails help set Three

the Wine column

Artisan Wine Depot

MOUNTAIN VIEW'S ARTISAN WINE DEPOT is different from most wine shops. First off, the 5-month-old store is in an unlikely setting: behind a roll-top door next to an auto shop in an industrial strip of Mountain View.

"We're kind of like a speakeasy wine shop," says Artisan Wine Depot marketing specialist **JAMES TRAN** in reference to the store's discreet, camouflaged appearance.

Inside is a smuggler's cave of vinous treasures. The small space is densely packed with domestic and international wines, many of them from lesser-known, small production wineries. "It's like home cooking rather than mass, cafeteria-style cooking," Tran says of the store's selection. "We want to offer wines that have good stories to tell."

The shop also offers premium beers and soon will stock sake if they can find the space. For wine lovers, the place feels like an overloaded toy store.

Artisan Wine Depot also sets itself apart in that wine buyer **CHRISTINE TRAN**, James Tran's sister, is a sommelier. Sommeliers most often work in restaurants, and Christine used to put her wine knowledge to use at Mountain View's now-closed Castro Point restaurant. She also has experience in corporate wine buying and beverage-program development for retail and restaurant establishments such as the Straits Restaurant Group and the Wine Club. As the sommelier-in-residence at the wine shop, she is able to walk customers through her wine selections and help them pick the right wine. She also sticks little tasting notes with food pairings to each bottle, kind of like a cheat sheet for wine.

She has created a feature on her websites (artisanwineshop.com and askthesommelier.com) called "Ask the Sommelier." Not to be confused with Metro's monthly column "Ask the Sommelier," Christine Tran answers questions about food and wine pairings, serving wine and other queries submitted online. She's hoping to enlist the help of other sommeliers to offer a robust panel of experts.

She has tasted every wine in the store (not all at once) and aims to offer great wine values and wines that are "varietally correct," i.e., wines that best express the characteristics of the grapes from which they're made. Finding good wine is easy in California, but finding good wine at a good value is the challenge. "There's an art to finding good wine at a good value," she says.

White males dominate the wine industry, so as an immigrant who fled Vietnam with her family by boat after the fall of Saigon, Christine Tran offers some refreshing diversity in the vanilla wine world. She left a career in high tech to pursue her passion for wine. Because of her mother's partial French ancestry, she was exposed to wine when she was growing up but only on a limited basis. She's a certified sommelier now and is preparing for the arduous master sommelier exam. There are 150 master sommeliers in the world, and only 14 are women.

Finally, in spite of the Artisan Wine Depot's low-tech industrial setting, it's actually a rather technologically sophisticated operation. On Christine Tran's recommendation I picked up a bottle of a 2007 Brusco San Valentino Lambrusco 2007 and nonvintage Praia Vinho Verde. An online account was created and my receipt emailed to me.

The coolest part is that when I logged in later I could see my purchases and then click on the wines to read tasting notes and background information on the wines. For regular customers this is a great feature that allows them to retrieve details about wines they enjoyed but can't quite remember. The store's online inventory matches the in-store inventory. Order online, and if you like, the staff will even box up your order and chill it for you if necessary. That makes pickup a breeze and saves on shipping.

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Artisan Wine Shop
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SNIFF TEST Christine Tran tests a fine vintage at Artisan Wine Shop.