

AUDACIOUS AND VINACEOUS

Portland's new wine bar stomps grapes with stilettos by Timothy Krause

In the window of Crush hangs a poster revealing a masculine ankle in a tall spike heel piercing an errant grape. Gay owners and life partners Woody Clarke and Mitch Calhoun want guests to know upfront that this new nightspot might crush a few expectations about wine bars.

"Crush takes the pretentiousness out so that you can really get down to what's important, which is tasting and experimenting with all the different flavors," Clarke explains. "And the fun part of wine, which is comparing wines with people at the table."

But that's not all. On the weekends, the waiters at Crush will be in drag.

Full, big, tall and very theatrical drag, Clarke says. He and his partner have sought an elegant atmosphere, but they hope the concept of drag queen waiters will provide disarming counterpoint to a wine bar's typical hauteur.

Although connoisseurs are sure to find a favorite among the more than 30 selections on Crush's list, the real focus is on getting more people interested in wine in a comfortable and undaunting setting. Soon, for example, the bar will offer "flights" of wine: Instead of choosing just one bottle, customers order a series of three glasses of different wines. One flight might be of red wines from a district in Spain, while another might include a variety of chardonnays from California.

A nibbler's menu complements both the palate and the vintners' vision of a generous environment of sharing. The bill is made up of lighter fare,



Mitch Calhoun (left) and Woody Clarke have a Crush on wine



PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

but most items come in portions large enough for a whole table. That includes vegetarians, because nearly every choice has a vegan option.

"The space is really about taste," Clarke suggests. "When you order food here, it comes on a big platter with enough to share so that you can talk about how things taste. The wine comes by the bottle, or you can order a flight, so you can really experiment."

The owners also were moved to develop a gathering spot that is an alternative to dark bars with video screens.

"A wine bar should be more sensual than a tavern or a cocktail lounge," Clarke notes. "You should be coming in here with a sensory focus.

You should be drinking it all in."

To keep the senses focused on taste, Calhoun and Clarke have designated Crush a nonsmoking bar. Patrons who want to light up, however, will find a comfortable outdoor space with tables, seating and a heater for cooler weather.

The owners don't expect Crush to be exclusively a gay bar, but they envision a progressive crowd, at least on weekends. They have specified Thursday as boys night; once they have sufficient female staff, Sunday will be girls night.

"This is a friendly place to sit on the couch with your boyfriend and hold hands and give him a little kiss," Clarke says. "It's a good place to come and be intimate with your friends or with your partner.

I want to make sure that no matter what night of the week it is, people can come in here on a date or come in here alone hoping to meet someone, and they're going to be in a safe place."

Clarke and Calhoun's backgrounds are as unusual as their business venture, and neither has any professional experience managing a bar or restaurant.

For five years, Clarke served as director of Art from the Heart, a Portland co-op for developmentally disabled artists. On the side, he worked as a massage therapist. Calhoun has kept his day job as a call center manager for Kaiser Permanente but puts in his share of hours behind the bar or in the kitchen.

The inspiration for the business—and the drag queen waiters—came during breast cancer fundraisers the couple held each year at their Northeast Portland home. Their yard and garden would be transformed into a venue for more than 200 guests.

With each event, more people suggested they open up a permanent space. About a year ago, Calhoun and Clarke agreed, setting plans for Crush in motion.

"This place really comes out of the same nurturing impulse," Clarke says. "I'm trying to keep in mind that this is all just another party."

But Clarke is quick to credit his circle of friends for both inspiration and help in transforming a former bakery space into an urban wine cellar. Crush's grand opening will be held June 22, a night he says will feature "cute hunky boys and drag queens stomping grapes...or whatever fruit we find in season." [E]

CRUSH is located at 1412 S.E. Morrison St. and can be reached at 503-235-8150. The bar opens at 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday.

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