

## Greater Reading's Newest Hot Spot Winedown Café & Winebar

By Rebecca J. Simmons | Photos by Heidi Reuter

**PICTURE THIS:** elegant wine glasses perched on a stunning, exotic wood-top bar, glossy sheen reflecting ambient lighting. Rich, tonal colors give way to warm and intimate little corners, perfect for hiding out. Small couches, funky chairs, a light menu to sample with that hard-to-find wine.... no, this isn't a dream or a chic bar in Philly. Welcome to Winedown Café & Winebar in West Reading, the newest addition to nightlife in Berks County.

In the bustling 600 block of Penn Avenue sits owner Ben Franco's entrepreneurial dream.

"I've always wanted to do something, but I never really knew what," says Franco. "I was inspired in the sense that I was longing for a place to go, and I was bored going to all the same places."

Franco has done a little bit of everything, from maintenance to process engineering, but now he's in the business of wine, turning his hobby and passion into the hot spot everyone is talking about.

"I've always been a connoisseur of good things, I guess," says Franco. "I immersed myself in study when I was honing in on a wine bar. I went to lots of wineries. I took wine classes at the wine school in Philadelphia. Wine is a fun hobby."

He started with a desire to bring something to Berks that he felt was missing. He toyed with the ideas of a martini bar, various franchises and then a wine bar. Two years ago, a friend of his took him on a "field trip" to Philadelphia and gave him a tour of some of her favorite wine bars.

"That sealed it for me because the concepts were not large-scale; they were small, not overly complicated," says Franco. "Those places were vibrant and full of people. I wanted a beautiful bar with the concept of lounge seating." And he wanted the environment he created to go with the name - Winedown. Relax, enjoy, you're drinking wine.

Brother Sal Franco and friend Steve Kruse came on as investors in his venture. Franco began to visualize what his space might look like, pulling inspirations from his experiences.

"I've always known what I wanted a place to feel like," says Franco. "I took my favorite things from places I'd seen or been to." The bar top was inspired by something he saw in a magazine. It's made of zebra wood, an exotic and distinctive striped wood. "I thought that was fantastic and thought we could re-create it," he says. Lucky for him, friend Steve

Trupp could do just that and built the exotic wood bar and back bar for Winedown.

The end result is a breathtaking visual that anchors the intimate space.

Designer Chrystal Hardinger of Interior Images of PA Inc., Wyomissing, and Tiffany André of Furniture Soup, Reading, helped him see the vision come to life. The end result is a "lounge-y" atmosphere in a warm and intimate setting. For Franco, the space and design support the experience he hopes to give customers through the wine and food they select.

What he serves to customers is a selection of wines that aren't available in the area. All wines are special orders, and they change frequently, so there is always something new to try. From the wines you'll sample to the glass you'll sip it from, Franco has considered all of the details.

"We're serving wine in fine glassware," he says. "It makes it a more enjoyable experience." The light menu features small plate samplings meant to enhance the wine selections. Artisan



Balsamic, Figs and Goat Cheese Flatbread

## DESTINATIONS & DIVERSIONS



Owner Ben Franco

cheeses like Primadonna from the Netherlands and Comte Gruyere from France are popular with customers.

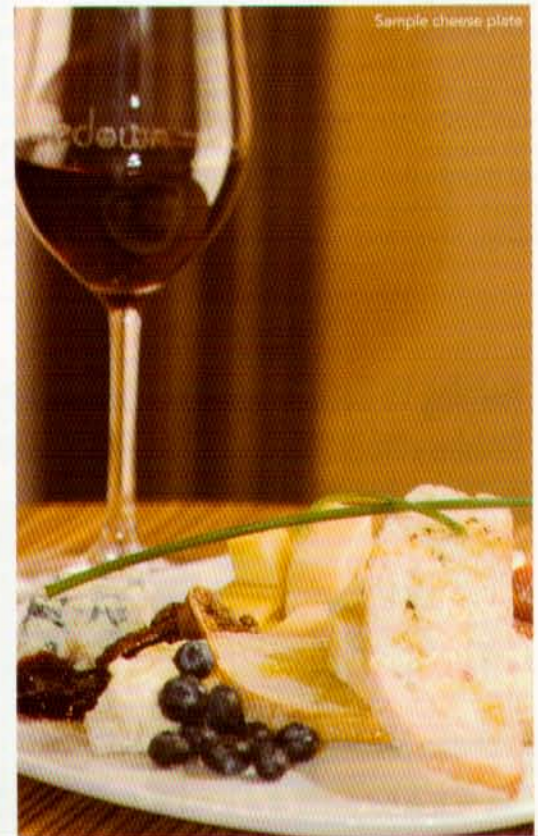
Other customer favorites include fig and goat cheese flatbreads drizzled with balsamic, Philly cheesesteak spring rolls served with a sweet Thai chili sauce, and smoked pastrami salmon on biscuit. Longtime friend Chef Mike Geary helped Franco with the menu and with kitchen startup. Current Chef Tomas Gonzales helps Franco to maintain a menu that stays fresh and interesting.

Franco encourages people to mix and match flavors and taste sensations based on what tastes good to their palette, not by old-guard etiquette about wine.

Winedown opened in July and the response has been overwhelmingly positive, Franco says. There are already regulars who make suggestions based on their own favorite wines.

Franco says he hopes customers will step outside the box and be adventurous with wine when they visit. He says, "Our goal is to see if we can get people to try something new."

*Winedown Café & Winebar,  
622 Penn Ave., West Reading; 610.373.4907;  
www.winedowncafe.net.*



Sample cheese plate