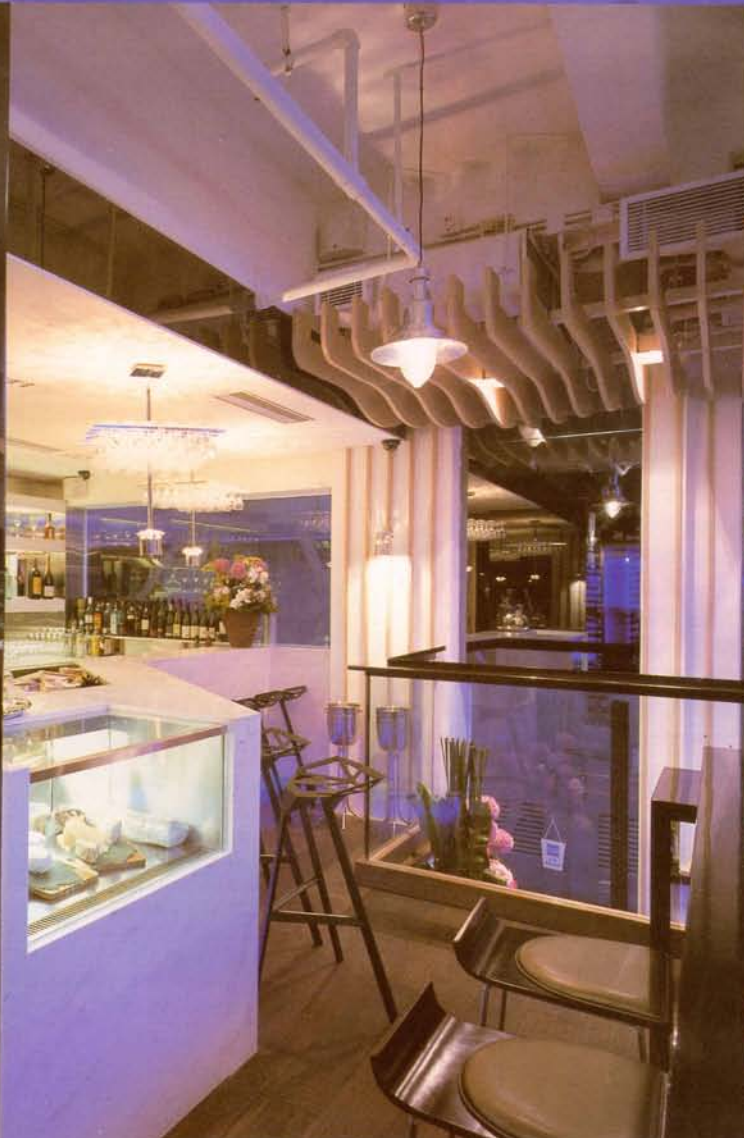


As technology changes the way that wine bars operate, *John Saeki* looks into the impact of Enomatic as it combines form, function and modern design



Tasting the future of design

The blue glow that emanates from an alley just off Wellington Street is the first sign there is something different about Tastings Wine Bar. Walk into the modern space and the décor isn't the only sign of innovation and contemporary fittings. In fact, Tastings leads the way in design from a technological perspective as well, using a new and revolutionary wine serving system called Enomatic.

Designed around the use of a gas called argon, this futuristic dispenser serves wine by the glass from bottles that keep fresh for up to three weeks after opening. The system has changed the way restaurants and bars can serve wine, increased the number of varietals they can offer at one time, and impacted the design element of bar spaces as well.

Contemporary style, futuristic design

The entrance of Tastings is warmly lit by rustic hurricane lamps hanging from the ceiling. A custom-made refrigerated wine rack covers the back wall from the floor to the ceiling, light radiating from it and imbuing the bar with a warm glow.

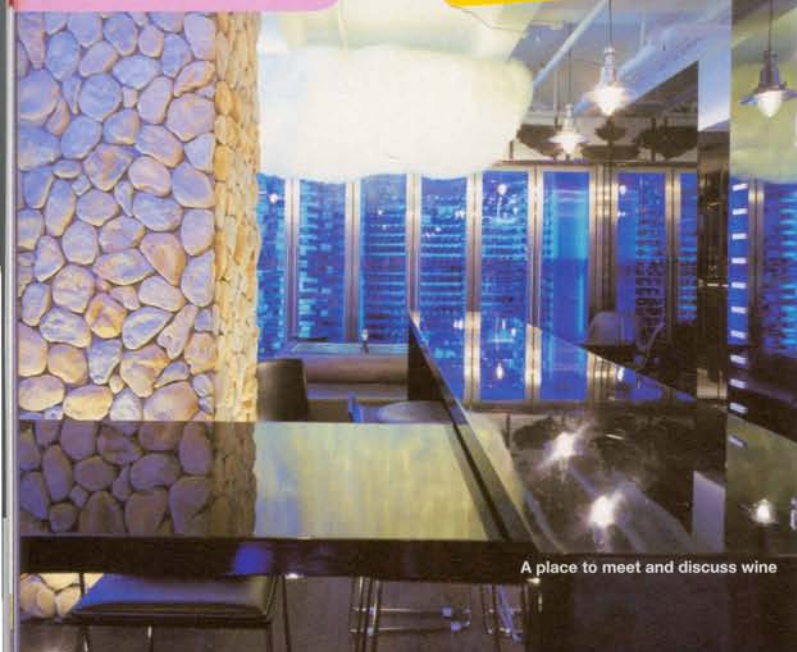
The dark wooden floorboards are sound absorbent, softening the din common to most bars. "The theme is – not too dark, not too noisy. People can chat. They're not just here to taste the wine; they've got to be able to talk about it too. Even if you don't know about a wine you can learn about it, read about it on the list, and so be able to enjoy it without having an environment where you can't hear yourself think," Bar Director Charlene Dawes explains. "I wanted a natural feel, using a lot of material like stone and wood."

Tastings avoids the proverbial bottleneck of a conventional bar setup thanks to the 40 self-serving dispensers along the sidewall. Five machines are lined up end to end, each one responsible for dispensing wine from eight different bottles. The reds are kept at room temperature while the whites are chilled behind a glass screen. Glasses hang artfully above, ready for customers to slide off the rail, and fill up with a vintage of their choice.

"I had seen the [Enomatic] concept overseas and I thought that it could work here, if you pay attention to how it is set up and not just throw it in the corner. I decided to make it the main [focus], with a whole wall of machines, making it as attractive as possible."

The counter along the row of dispensers provides a gathering point for people who want to remain close to the source of wine, chatting and sharing opinions on the various bottles, which are illuminated from below with strip lighting that makes it easy to read the labels. A high-stool, open plan seating section in the middle of the room is set up around a natural, stone-clad pillar, while a small bar section serves other liquors, like grappa, port and Champagne.





A place to meet and discuss wine

Enomatic technology

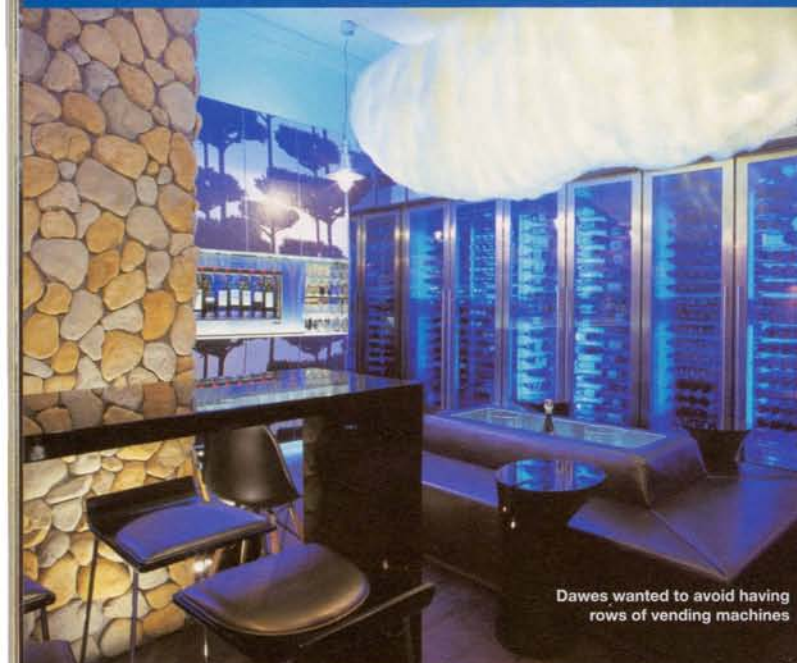
Enomatic was founded by Riccardo Gosi and Lorenzo Bencista in Italy in 2002 to market and supply their revolutionary new wine dispensing system. The key to the operation is the use of an inert gas to stop the natural process of oxidation and decay that begins as soon as a bottle is opened. This is achieved by replacing the air space in a bottle with inert gasses nitrogen or argon, as soon as it is opened. Every time wine is poured, more gas replaces the empty space. Although Enomatic claims the machines will work with either gas, company representatives advised Dawes to use the more expensive argon for the best results.

This set-up allows a bottle to be opened for a sample, and then kept ready to serve for up to three weeks. The technology offers bars the flexibility to be more adventurous with their wine selection, which in turn should attract a crowd.

To streamline payment, Enomatic have built an automated database system that changes the way wine sales can be tabulated. In the case of Tastings there are five dispensers lined end-to-end, each with eight bottles available to dispense and a single slot for a card. Effectively, people can be served concurrently.

Servings come in three sizes, 25ml, 50ml and 75ml, with the price for each displayed electronically whenever a card is put in the machine. When a bottle is nearly empty, a warning is automatically sent to the bar.

All the data is stored electronically, which provides the bar with accurate statistics on customer choice and selection, making it useful for purchasing and marketing. The data is also held centrally by Enomatic, proving a wealth of wine drinking information from 73 countries around the world.



Dawes wanted to avoid having rows of vending machines

There is a comfortable lounge area of low seating for about a dozen people at the back of the room, beneath a glowing, rotating cloud that is 2 metres long and 50 centimetres deep. "It's a Nuvola," Dawes explains, which is a fluffy, luminous, motorised accessory by Studio Design Italia. "Sometimes when people are drunk they look at it for a long time," she jokes.

Old and new world opportunities

The machines are operated by a card with a magnetic strip similar to a room key at a hotel, which is obtained from the bar. The cards are usually configured for pre-payment, but can also record purchases like a debit card, and customers can pay at the end of the evening. Machines are programmed so that patrons can slide their card into a slot in the machine, position the glass below a nozzle, they want and choose the amount of wine they want: a full glass, half glass, or a tasting portion. At the touch of a button the wine pours, and payment is deducted from the card.

It sounds a bit clinical, but Dawes was careful to avoid lining a wall with "vending machines." She placed the emphasis on maintaining a sense of fun and style instead, and it works.



A warm atmosphere

"Central is quite happening and it moves very quickly. People come here for a drink and they move on. Sometimes they go to four or five bars in one night, so we have adapted to that [lifestyle] and made it fun.

The Enomatic technology, which allows bottles to stay fresh for up to three weeks, makes it possible for Tastings to cater to all wine drinkers – offering fine wines and everyday bottles side by side. "The selection of wine is important," she says. The bar attracts wine connoisseurs who want to try rare wines by the glass without committing to a whole bottle as well as novices keen to expand their palate.

At the top end, guests can sample a 1997 Penfolds Grange for HK\$170 (US\$21.9), or a full glass at HK\$680 (US\$87.7). At the low end, a glass of Albrecht Gewurztraminer was available at HK\$64 (US\$8.3) and 38 other choices fall somewhere in between.

Enomatic has revolutionised the way bars are able to offer service wine and certainly as Tastings Wine Bar proves the system is making a statement above the future of design. **AHCT**