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Winding down with wine, cheese and chocolate at new ENO

By Terry Armour

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Sometimes, the forces of Mother Nature are stronger than even good old-fashioned advertising.

On a recent day, as an incessant rain put a damper on last-minute holiday shopping along the Magnificent Mile, some shoppers found themselves huddled outside the window at Eno, the new wine bar just off the lobby of the InterContinental Chicago hotel. Invariably, someone would peek through the window and notice the people inside cozying up to glasses of wine.

Like clockwork, they'd come out of the rain and into Eno, a fact that wasn't lost on Scott Harney, one of the lounge's wine directors.

"Look out there--it's miserable," Harney said as hostess LaParis Wright led the latest dampened, inquisitive customers to a table. "And it's very warming in here."

After quietly opening Dec. 18, Eno (505 N. Michigan Ave.) already has a growing clientele of both tourists and area businessmen and women who have recommended the place as a quiet, upscale alternative for post-work drinks.

And then there are those who have peeked in, gotten a glimpse of the wine, cheese and chocolate displays, and wandered inside to check it out.

"We're getting a lot of street traffic," beamed Harney.

Strategic Hotels and Resorts, which owns the InterContinental, decided a few months ago to refurbish the hotel's lobby-level bar, turning it into a more upscale lounge. Wine, cheese and chocolate are the draws, with the hopes of expanding the idea to its other properties if the Chicago Eno turns out to be a success.

The intimate 1,200-square-foot room has a warm atmosphere, with five boomerang-shaped tables surrounded by comfortable leather stools. And with the bottles of wine stocked along the walls, it feels like you're seated in a personal wine cellar.

There's also a private tasting room with a view into the lounge's wine cellar, which stores 5,000 bottles.

Don't be intimidated by the look and feel of the place, which offers up to 500 varieties of wines from all over the world. Harney and fellow wine director Jason Prah are there to walk novices and experts alike through the wine menu.

"Hopefully, we have a much more savvy customer base," Prah said. "People are a little more adventurous and they want to be turned on to something new."

"In order for us to be successful, we want people who don't know much about wine to come in."

Eno serves no other alcohol but offers wine flights of three from \$13 to \$17 (bottles run from \$25 to \$2,000) and cheese flights of three for \$11.

Mary Strabel was among a group of women who recently came in after work. "We saw the sign and we all like wine so we were very excited to try it," Strabel said. The group ordered a bottle of Frog's Leap Merlot and hung out for a couple of hours, enjoying themselves.

A few tables away, Christine Giovannelli and Christopher Sanchez, both lawyers, were sampling from a wine flight (suggested by Prah). It was their first time in Eno.

"The ambience is lovely, the idea is charming and the crowd is cool," Giovannelli said.

Sanchez agreed.

"It's very cozy, especially for the winter," he said. "The wine selection looks like it's pretty impressive. I will be back."

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Eno Wine Bar

Lobby Level, InterContinental Chicago Hotel, 505 N. Michigan Ave.; 312-321-8738, www.enowinerooms.com; 3 p.m.-midnight Sunday-Thursday; 1 p.m.-1 a.m. Friday and Saturday.

The buzz: This upscale wine bar, which features 500 varieties of wines priced \$25 (Hoffman Estates Shiraz) to \$2,000 (1990 Cheval Blanc), need not intimidate. Wine directors Scott Harney and Jason Prah are on board to educate you not just about wine, but about exotic cheeses and chocolates as well. The cozy room, surrounded by stacks of wine bottles, seats just 45, which lends an air of intimacy.

Terry's tip: If you're a novice, let Harney or Prah suggest a wine flight--three glasses of regional wines priced from \$13 to \$17.

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