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San Francisco: **Barrique**

You no longer have to travel to wine country to do some barrel sampling; just stop into *Barrique*, a new wine bar across from dining hotspot *Cotogna* in Jackson Square. A custom wine tap system built into a rack of oak barrels delivers eight private-label wines sourced from all over California by winemaker Matthew Weese; whenever possible, he offers two examples of the same variety from different appellations, so you can compare and contrast. If you don't feel like geeking out quite so hard, check out sommelier Tom Capo's wine list: 100-plus wines, most well under \$100. California is well represented, but he's also stocked it with picks such as August Kessler riesling from Germany's Rheingau and Kofererhof kerner from northern Italy, well pitched to the charcuterie and cheeses on offer. —LOU BUSTAMANTE

Barrique, 461 Pacific St., San Francisco; 415-421-9200, barriquesf.com



Climate Change in Napa

A recent study commissioned by Napa Valley Vintners suggests that stylistic decisions, rather than climate change, may be the primary factor driving increased ripeness levels in Napa Valley grapes. Previous studies had reported a local warming trend of as much as 3°F over the past 70 years, some even predicting that Napa Valley would soon become too hot to produce fine wine. The new report, titled "Climate and Phenology in Napa Valley," identified a temperature increase in the range of 1 to 2°F over the same time period.

Dr. Daniel Cayan, a researcher at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego and lead author of the report, commented that some prior studies were challenged by a lack of reliable data on Napa Valley temperatures. Many of the recording stations cited in Napa climate studies were never designed to measure climate change; some are located near urban infrastructure, which affects their measurements. To broaden the data set, the research team compiled records from scores of growers across Napa Valley. "It was amazing how much data was available in the Napa community," said Dr. Cayan. "We were lucky to have this other data that we could scrutinize."

The study also examined the effect of climate on processes that control grape ripening. Stages of phenological development such as bloom and veraison are strongly correlated to temperature thresholds. So far, the study reports, observations of Napa's grape ripening patterns do not seem to indicate a rapid warming trend.

The study did note a distinct trend toward increased Brix at harvest since 1990. The authors suggest that the higher average Brix levels may be the result of later picking times (two to three weeks on average for most grape varieties over the last 30 years), as well as vineyard practices such as leaf and cluster thinning, but caution that further research in this area is needed.

Jerry Seps of Storybook Mountain Vineyards is confident that Napa's overall increase in Brix at harvest has more to do with stylistic preferences than temperature increases. Seps has been growing zinfandel and other varieties in Napa Valley's Calistoga AVA for three decades, keeping detailed climatological records for each vintage. He observes that growers are picking later than a decade ago, partly because consumer tastes have shifted toward softer wines ready to drink on release. "We now harvest 1 to 1.5 degrees Brix riper," he says. "Weather didn't have anything to do with it. And we probably adjusted less than most people."

Those associated with the NVV study are quick to point out that the report is in no way a denial of the realities of climate change or its potential effects on Napa Valley. "There is a folkloric notion that the warmer it gets in the Central Valley, the more cold air will be drawn in from the Bay. But if you look at the worldwide trends, I wouldn't be sure that we're simply fine," says David Graves, a co-founder of Saintsbury Vineyards in Carneros and a member of the NVV task force that initiated the study. "The study reinforces the fact that we all need to keep detailed and accurate records. The message here is: Stay tuned, be watchful; don't be complacent." —LUKE SYKORA

The End of an Era

Ab Simon, founding chairman of Seagram's Château & Estate Wines, died January 1. Simon, an Iraqi emigre, grew the company's fine wine division into one of the most powerful forces in the business, importing about a third of the production of Bordeaux's most prominent châteaux. Over the course of several decades, he became one of the most significant influences on the setting of prices in the US fine wine market. —CARSON DEMMOND



Boston: **Island Creek Oyster Bar**

Island Creek Oyster Bar gets its name from the waters of the south-of-the-city hamlet of Duxbury, where a briny bunch of earnest men operate an oyster farming collective. This may be the first ocean-to-table restaurant we know of. What doesn't come from their farm comes from local waters, including the lobsters that are hand-delivered by chef Jeremy Sewall's cousin, a lobsterman from Maine. To match Sewall's deft culinary skills, the wine list mostly features wines by small producers from coastal and high-altitude regions, such as the Domaine Les Hautes Noëllés Muscadet, a classic match for oysters. Cocktails use wine, too, like the Seaside Spritzer, which pairs Westport Rivers Pinot Noir with citrus and preserved apricot. —ANNIE COPPS

Island Creek Oyster Bar, 500 Commonwealth Ave., Boston; 617-532-5300, islandcreekoysterbar.com