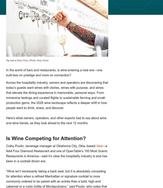

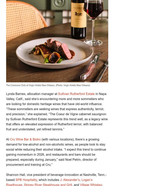

FOOD & BEVERAGE

Wine Trends Shaping Bars and Restaurants in 2026

By **Aaron Kiel** · Jan 20, 2026 11:48am

Wine trends · Food & Beverage

Tap wall at Sixty Vines. (Photo: Sixty Vines)

In the world of bars and restaurants, is wine entering a new era—one built less on prestige and more on connection?

Across the hospitality industry, owners and operators are discovering that today's guests want wines with stories, wines with purpose, and wines that elevate the dining experience in memorable, personal ways. From immersive tastings and curated flights to sustainable farming and small-production gems, the 2026 wine landscape reflects a deeper shift in how people want to drink, share, and discover.

Here's what owners, operators, and other experts had to say about wine and wine trends, as they look ahead to the next 12 months.

Is Wine Competing for Attention?

Colby Poulin, beverage manager at Oklahoma City, Okla.-based Vast—a AAA Four Diamond Restaurant and one of OpenTable's 100 Most Scenic Restaurants in America—said it's clear the hospitality industry is and has been in a cocktail driven era.

"Wine isn't necessarily taking a back seat, but it is absolutely competing for attention when a refined Manhattan or signature cocktail is more commonly ordered to be paired with an entrée than a bold, high-end cabernet or a rustic bottle of Montepulciano," said Poulin, who notes that today's guest often sees more perceived value in ordering two or three different cocktails rather than committing to a $200 to $300 bottle of wine.

To try to bring high end wines back to the table, Vast implemented and currently uses a Coravin system for its high-end wine-by-the-glass offerings.

"A Coravin remains one of the most effective solutions for offering premium wines, without committing to overhauling the space for a gas pressure BTG [by the glass] setup," shared Poulin. "This allows us to feature higher end bottles in a by-the-glass format, while maintaining quality, minimizing waste, and giving our guests the option to experience more refined wines without the whole bottle commitment."

Ken Hoffman, chief operating officer of Denver, Colo.-based Dividend Restaurant Group, which includes Sullivan's Steakhouse, Eddie Merlot's, and Beauty & the Burger, said they're also seeing a shift—guests are drinking less often, but when they do, they're choosing better-quality wine.

"They want lighter, fresher styles, sustainably produced, and easy to pair with today's modern menus," said Hoffman. "Long wine lists sorted only by region are losing relevance. What works today is a clean, intentional list presented in simple, approachable categories. Operators who streamline and focus on guest experience—not volume—are winning."

At Sixty Vines, guests gravitate toward wine programs that feel approachable and story-driven. (Photo: Sixty Vines)

Alexis Kirkland, vice president of luxury marketing at Treasury Americas, a division of Treasury Wine Estates, an Australian-based company, said that as owners and operators move into 2026, the most important trend to note about wine—specifically luxury wine—is the redefinition of what "luxury" means to Gen Z and Millennials.

"This generation is moving away from traditional cues and gravitating toward immersive, curated, and visually striking experiences," explained Kirkland. "For them, luxury is defined by how a moment feels—and how shareable it is—not by price point alone."

Judd Fruia, vice president of operations at Haywire, a Texas-based restaurant chain, said guest behaviors are shaping the direction of wine in 2026, and the focus is on exploration and comfort.

"Younger guests, especially Gen Z, are looking for wines that feel new or trendy," said Fruia. "They want to explore, and they gravitate to wine by the glass because it lets them try something without making a big commitment. Then there are the guests who prefer familiarity. They stick with the regions and producers they trust, like Napa and Sonoma, or names such as Caymus and Silver Oak. There is also a smaller group that seeks out high-end bottles from places like Bordeaux and Burgundy."

Fruia said for operators, the priority is building a wine list that speaks to all three groups—the guests who want to explore, the ones who prefer familiarity, and the ones who want the higher end bottles. "It should offer room for discovery, keep the classics, and include a few premium bottles that elevate the program," he said. "The continued growth in wine-by-the-glass should play a major role in how operators structure their lists for 2026."

Guests are seeking hidden gems in trusted new- and old-world areas of wine. (Photo: Virgin Hotels New Orleans)

Regarding Wine, 2026 May Be the Year of 'Intentional Drinking'

Dom Delledera, beverage director at Sixty Vines, a "winemaker's restaurant" with wine on tap and numerous locations, said 2026 is shaping up to be the year of "intentional drinking."

"At Sixty Vines, we're seeing guests who are choosing wines that tell a story—how they're grown, who made them, and the sustainability practices behind them," said Delledera. "Value is also becoming more important; people still want quality, but they want to know it's worth it."

Delledera noted that lighter, fresher styles will continue to dominate with wine choices, including bright whites, coastal reds, and chilled reds that pair well with food and fit the way people want to drink now. "Experience also carries more weight than ever," he said. "Guests gravitate toward wine programs that feel approachable, story-driven—we call it the 'pinkies down' approach."

Jesse Carr, director of food and beverage at Virgin Hotels New Orleans, said that in 2026, guests will be seeking hidden gems in trusted new- and old-world areas. "Example would be natural wine from France or Rieslings from New York and Australia, fun reds from Germany, and so forth," he said. "I think you will see bigger houses making the move to go outside their comfort zones and do collabs and one-off vintages."

The Commons Club at Virgin Hotels New Orleans. (Photo: Virgin Hotels New Orleans)

Lynda Barnes, allocation manager at Sullivan Rutherford Estate in Napa Valley, Calif., said she's encountering more and more sommeliers who are looking for domestic heritage wines that have old-world influence. "These sommeliers are seeking wines that express authenticity, terroir, and precision," she explained. "The Coeur de Vigne cabernet sauvignon by Sullivan Rutherford Estate represents this trend well, as a legacy wine that offers an elevated expression of Rutherford terroir, with balanced fruit and understated, yet refined tannins."

At Cru Wine Bar & Bistro (with various locations), there's a growing demand for low-alcohol and non-alcoholic wines, as people look to stay social while reducing their alcohol intake. "I expect this trend to continue gaining momentum in 2026, and restaurants and bars should be prepared, especially during January," said Noel Petrin, director of procurement and training at Cru."

Shannon Hall, vice president of beverage innovation at Nashville, Tenn.-based SPB Hospitality, which includes J. Alexander's, Logan's Roadhouse, Stoney River Steakhouse and Grill, and Village Whiskey, also thinks sales of low- and no-alcohol wines continue to grow, driven by health-conscious consumers and younger demographics.

"Guests are still in a 'mindful drinking' mindset, so I anticipate this becoming a more prominent part of wine lists in 2026," said Hall.

Brandon Thordarson, former executive chef and new franchisee with Moxies, a popular restaurant chain with more than 50 locations in Canada and in the United States, agrees that the low- and no-alcohol category continues to rise, and said owners and operators may want to expand their offerings.

"Low-and no-alcohol wines have also improved significantly in the past few years," said Thordarson. "Offering at least one option, ideally a sparkling, can be a great addition for summer, celebrations, and guests under 21."

From Wine Cocktails to Bubbles and Classics, There's Something for Everyone

Besides the low- and no-alcohol category making a splash, wine cocktails may catch fire in 2026. According to Karen Bonarrigo, co-owner and chief administrative officer of Texas-based Messina Hof Winery, which has multiple locations, the wine community is trying out wine cocktails that look and feel like liquor-based drinks but instead are wine-based.

"It [wine cocktails] opens an interest in wine to those who might not initially reach for stemware, and it gives tried-and-true wine lovers a hip way to fall in love with their favorites all over again," said Bonarrigo. "Our cocktail recipes are also made to be non-alcoholic, if requested, which gives our sober-curious friends a chance to sip on something fun while visiting the winery."

Hall, of SPB Hospitality—pointed to another wine category. "Let's not forget the bubbles—more guests are interested in this category beyond Prosecco," she said. "My advice, which I'm currently implementing, is to rebalance by-the-glass offerings to align with growing trends, refresh the classics, and improve margins."

The National, Autograph Collection Downtown OKC, in Oklahoma City, Okla. (Photo: The National, Autograph Collection)

Lee Nevarez, sommelier at The National, Autograph Collection Downtown OKC, in Oklahoma City, Okla., said sparkling wine is indeed one of the fastest growing categories at their establishment.

"Guests order it [sparkling wine] as an opener, with dinner, or on its own at the bar," said Nevarez. "Prosecco still moves, but I see a rising interest in domestic traditional method sparkling, cava, and higher quality offerings that give people a step up without breaking the bank.

Nevarez said that on the steakhouse side, Cabernet is still the anchor and that's not changing: "What I do see changing is how guests mix it into their meal. Many will start with something lighter like pinot, Gamay, Rioja, or a chilled red, then move to cabernet for the main course. At Tellers Restaurant [at The National], where acidity pairs so well with the food, I see people gravitating toward crisp whites like sauvignon blanc, pinot grigio, and Albariño, along with reds that stay bright and structured rather than dense."

Nevarez noted that in terms of categories gaining momentum, sauvignon blanc continues to dominate with regions outside Sancerre [the Loire Valley in central France] getting more attention, especially New Zealand, Chile, and coastal California, because guests want bright, clean, fruit forward wines that pair with everything from seafood to cheese to lighter starters.

A group enjoys wine with their meal at Sixty Vines. (Photo: Sixty Vines)

For Justin Mueller—sommelier at Denver, Colo.-based Alteño, from Michelin-starred Chef Johnny Curiel—offbeat wines are trending. "Maybe it's just because our restaurants focus heavily on Mexican wine, and Alteño specifically on South American wines, but I've seen guests more open to trying offbeat wines from lesser-known regions," he explained. "As prices increase for blockbuster regions like Burgundy and Barolo, I think consumers will look for wines of parallel quality and ageability elsewhere in the world. I can see something like Xinomavro from Greece or Garnacha from the Sierra de Gredos in Spain gaining popularity."

According to Leith Steel, director of insights and brand communications at CARBONATE—a creative agency that specializes in hospitality—Vinho Verde white wines will grow in popularity.

"Naturally low in alcohol, crisp, and lightly spritzy, Vinho Verde aligns with modern tastes," said Steel. "It is tailor-made for casual, everyday moments—picnics, poolside afternoons, and easy weeknight dinners and its affordability and easy-drinking style make it accessible. The recent boom in Portuguese tourism—over one million U.S. tourists visited in the first half of 2024, more than double the figure from just two years prior—is fueling familiarity, curiosity and demand." Carbonate recently released "The Next Era of Wine: Strategies for a Changing Industry," a playbook for everyone with a stake in wine's future.

Lisa Beaumont, sommelier at Ladyhawk at Kimpton La Peer Hotel in West Hollywood, Calif., predicts 2026 will see continued interest in indigenous wines and terroir-driven wines, which connect guests not only to the glass but also to history and culture. "This approach works hand-in-hand with Ladyhawk's cuisine, creating food-and-wine experiences that feel seamless," she said. "For owners, operators, and professionals, emphasizing story-driven, terroir-focused wines resonate with guests. Wines that reflect history, place, and sustainable practices make your wine program memorable and, in turn, profitable."

Erik Martella, former winery operations vice president at Constellation Brands and wine lecturer and wine specialist at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, said 2026 may also see some new wine brands on the horizon.

"We're likely to see new brands popping up," said Martella. "Most producers will want to protect their existing brands' price points, even in the face of unsold inventory. Excess on-hand wine inventories and the availability of quality wine on the bulk wine market will entice many producers to launch new brands. These could be great values in terms of quality for the money, but if you put them on your list, check in on them regularly as quality might not be consistent over the long haul."

Erik Martella, former winery operations vice president at Constellation Brands and wine lecturer and wine specialist at Appalachian State University in North Carolina.

Wine in Kegs and on Tap, and What Customers Are Looking For

Hoffman, of Dividend Restaurant Group, expects wine in kegs and on tap to continue to expand in 2026, especially in high-volume settings.

"More producers are creating high-quality keg wines, which helps reduce waste, maintain freshness, and support sustainability," said Hoffman. "We'll continue to expand keg wine offerings in 2026."

According to Hoffman, screw caps may dominate for by-the-glass offerings. "They're consistent, easier for teams to execute, and deliver fresher pours," he said. "Most vineyards are offering this format now."

Delledera, of Sixty Vines, agrees that kegged wine is moving from trend to mainstream, along with other options. "Operators are adopting it for the sustainability upside, consistency, and dramatically reduced loss and spoilage," he said.

While keg wine and taps will make it easier for customers to discover new wines, guests are also seeking wines that are farmed sustainably, organically, and biodynamically, per Stephen Arnold, wine director of Bottega Napa Valley, an Italian restaurant in California's wine region.

"It's important to learn what's happening at the wineries and vineyards, where you're purchasing wines," said Arnold. "Are they committed to sustainable farming? How are they treating the land and the environment? For example, Adamvs on Howell Mountain goes far above the norm. Not only are they biodynamic and producing excellent wines, but they also have bees, donkeys and plentiful flowers on their property and vineyards. They have cows graze the land after harvest and in turn they leave behind natural fertilizer."

Be Intuitive and Authentic with Your Wine Menus in 2026

Overall, Katie Forstner, beverage manager and sommelier at Urban Hill in Salt Lake City, Utah—from Hill Top Hospitality—said it's an amazing privilege to serve and sell wine in today's market.

Urban Hill in Salt Lake City Utah, from Hill Top Hospitality. (Photo: Carla Boecklin)

"We have the most educated, adventurous cohort of drinkers in history, and I think we'll continue to see guests peruse our wine lists with open minds," shared Forstner. "I think people will continue to seek unique wines with a story that can pair with their meal."

Zoltan Nagy, general manager and sommelier at Macarena, a Spanish restaurant in Palo Alto, Calif., concluded that a successful wine program in 2026 is one that is intuitive, authentic, and aligned with a wellness-oriented lifestyle.

"By moving away from the heavy, okay wines of the past and embracing the lighter, fresher, and more transparent wines that complement modern cuisine, you will not only meet your customers' needs but exceed their expectations, building a reputation as a forward-thinking and relevant establishment," said Nagy.

At Macarena, a Spanish restaurant in Palo Alto, Calif. (Photo: Macarena)

Nagy also stressed that modern consumers, especially those focused on health, care about what's in their wine and how it was made. "The goal is no longer just to have a big, impressive list of famous names," he said. "It's to have a thoughtful list that complements the modern lifestyle and dining habits of nowadays. "Think of your wine program as an extension of your food menu's philosophy—fresh, authentic, and health-conscious. Getting lots of vertical vintages from the same producer will make your wine list stand out from competitors."

Petrin, of Cru Wine Bar & Bistro, noted: "The wine industry is having a tough moment right now. It's basically a correction. I think 2026 is the start of our comeback."