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Firehouse Wine Bar is a five-alarm hit in downtown

By: **SUSAN LARSSON** | July 30, 2014

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How do you win the Nappie Award for best new bar after

only three months in business? Well, if you're the Firehouse Wine Bar and Shop, you meld an inviting, comfortable space with an intriguing, far-ranging wine (and beer) list and warm, knowledgeable owners who genuinely want their customers to enjoy a nice glass of wine at a good price. Throw in the fact that they're likely to introduce you to a wine you've never heard of – which becomes your new Best Friend Forever – and you've got a sure-fire recipe for success.

Margo Alderton and Andre Lotz held the Firehouse Wine Bar's grand opening on April 25 of this year, hoping 30 or 40 people would show up – and they got 200! This figure probably tells you a bit about Mobile's crying need for venues like Firehouse, but it also makes clear that folks didn't just walk past the front windows and think "Hmmm, no; I don't think I'll go in there." Once you see the big red front doors (which still have the hook and ladder company's name above them) and notice the ranks of bottles along the antique brick wall inside, staying on the sidewalk just isn't an option.



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Margo and Andre hail most recently from New York, although both are seriously well-traveled people. Margo was born in Greece and Andre in South Africa, and you'd need a "Where's Waldo" map to trace their paths toward New York, with each stop along the way leaving an impression that's influenced their vision for a wine bar in Mobile. Margo, for example, says her first impression of downtown Mobile reminded her of Philadelphia in the 1990s, when its urban renaissance was just beginning.

Both Margo and Andre have fallen in love with downtown and want to see it thrive. Their personal contribution is their goal of making the Firehouse Wine Bar a place where people feel they can drop in every day or every week, not just every few months or so. This means keeping the wine and beer line-ups changing and the prices affordable – good news for us drinkers!

The wine list at Firehouse has what Andre calls a "southern-hemisphere focus," not only because of his South African roots but also because the wines of South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and various South American countries

often rival their Old World counterparts for quality but at a much lower price. Andre grooves on bold, spicy red wines (think Shiraz or Pinotage) and takes pride in explaining how southern-hemisphere reds are perfect for Mobile – due to similarities of climate and cuisine. He even finds parallels between Lower Alabama’s easy-going lifestyle and South Africa’s approach to viticulture, pointing out with a smile that pinotage – the red-wine grape synonymous with South Africa – was developed by crossing pinot noir with the more-rugged hermitage because pinot noir was simply too hard to grow.

Margo tends to concentrate on white wines although she, too, finds exciting bargains from south of the equator. She showed me Greywacke, New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc (Greywacke Vineyards, owned by Kevin Judd in New Zealand’s Marlborough region), which she said was Firehouse’s best-selling white. It has the grassy, grapefruity flavors typical of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc but is delicate and balanced, according to Margo, with medium acidity making for easy drinking.

The Firehouse Wine Bar currently serves about 20 wines by the glass (most in the \$6 range) and offers 100 or so by the bottle, which you can buy and enjoy there (\$5 corkage fee). Either way, the geographic range is astonishing – not just southern-hemisphere wines but also selections from California, Washington state, Germany, France and elsewhere. I was impressed by how much diversity could be packed cleverly into one cozy space. There are rosés among the reds and whites, too – and there’s nothing more refreshing than a dry rosé in summer. Firehouse stocks them from Spain and southern France, where folks know how to pass a hot afternoon in comfort.

You can also order a tasting flight of three wines, if you don’t quite know what you’re craving or just want to give some new wines a whirl. In the future Margo and Andre will offer set flights of, say, three Pinot Noirs or three Chardonnays, so you can compare and contrast various styles. By this fall you should be able to order food to complement your wine – small, tapas-like plates of finger foods for sharing and sampling, as with the wines. Margo and Andre want to stay focused on running a wine bar, so

knives and forks aren't on their agenda.

And if you fancy a beer you don't have to look elsewhere; Firehouse offers at least eight on tap and more in bottles or cans – also from an amazing range of locales. There were several Alabama-based brews when I visited (Fairhope, Back Forty, Good People, Straight to Ale) side by side with Italy's Peroni (Firehouse's best seller, according to Andre), Belgium's Leffe and Japan's Asahi. For the adventurous, Firehouse is pouring "Gose" from South Carolina's Westbrook Brewing Company – a "sour beer" combining attributes of German-style wheat beer with sea salt and coriander. Margo said it was like having pretzels already in your beer – which I guess the brewers figured saved some effort.

Margo and Andre say their biggest surprise since coming to Mobile – and winning a Nappie – has been "the positive and warm reception" they've received, "not just from customers but from other business-owners." Andre says he's felt a real "everybody's in this together" spirit among downtown businesses, while Margo adds, "Thank you, we

really have been overwhelmed by the support at all levels.” They even like Mobile’s after-work drinking crowd, which they say generates a celebratory vibe, not stressed-out like New Yorkers. For the future, they hope to “stay true to what we want to do – offer good wines at good prices and introduce people to new wines.” Sounds like a fine plan to me.

(Firehouse Wine Bar and Shop, 216 St. Francis St., just off Bienville Square; www.firehousewinebar.com.)

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