



Tellers features five wine cellars, with bottles costing as much as \$2,000 each.

A bounty of fine-wine knowledge

By: David Winzelberg March 14, 2014 0

Veteran sommelier Paulo Vilella learned about food and drink from the ground up.

Spending summers on his mother's farm in the Sao Borja region of southern Brazil, a teenaged Vilella helped tend to the family's wheat and corn crops and picked grapes from their spacious vineyards.

"That's where my passion for wine started," he said.

Vilella, who studied agricultural engineering at the Federal University of Rio De Janeiro, had originally planned a career in farming and food production. But after bringing his young son to New York City for several months of medical treatments, Vilella decided to leave Brazil for good and began eking out a living in Manhattan restaurants.

He worked his way up from busser to waiter to bartender, eventually becoming a manager – which is how he first learned about buying wine, adding a business finish to his youthful passion.

In 1996, Vilella landed a job at Windows on the World, the restaurant atop the World Trade Center, where he found himself immersed in wine culture.

"I took wine courses and got certified by the Sommeliers Society of America," he said.

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Vilella and his older son, Bernardo, who also worked at Windows on the World, decided to clock into the restaurant late so they could spend the morning celebrating his younger son Felipe's 11th birthday. By later that morning, of course, the World Trade Center's Twin Towers were reduced to rubble – the Vilellas not only lost many friends and co-workers, they also lost their jobs.

"It was tough for a while," Vilella said, still choked with emotion nearly 13 years later.

Three months after 9/11, Vilella became beverage director and sommelier at the Blue Fin restaurant in Times Square. He bought a house in Bay Shore and in 2002 began consulting the Bohlsen Restaurant Group on wines, finally signing on as Bohlsen's full-time corporate beverage director in 2008.

Though he oversees beverage operations at all seven of the group's restaurants, Vilella can usually be found at Tellers in Islip, popping in and out of one of the five wine cellars at the company's flagship eatery.

That includes two bank vaults famously converted to hold bottles instead of safety deposit boxes at the former Main Street bank building turned restaurant. Customers enrolled in Tellers Connoisseurs Club can keep their favorite wines chilling at a constant 58 degrees in personalized lockers inside the vault.

Though Tellers carries a wide assortment of trophy wines that sell for as much as \$2,000 a bottle, Vilella says most diners order bottles priced between \$75 and \$100.

"These days, customers are very conscious of value," he said. "They want a great wine without spending a lot of money."

The selection has exploded in recent years. Wines from more than 200 vintners – including at least 15 from Long Island – are currently stocked there.

To stay current on the latest brands and trends, Vilella travels to wine tastings and fairs throughout the year. Next month, he'll be visiting Verona, Italy, for the annual Vinitaly International Wine and Spirits Exhibition.

Vilella not only gives weekly wine classes for restaurant staff, he also spreads the virtues of the vine to Tellers' customers at the restaurant's "Inside the Vault" monthly wine tastings. Established oenophiles and folks who can't tell Chablis from cabernet pay \$50 apiece to crowd the restaurant's lounge, sample six different wines and learn a bit about their history – and they get a \$50 Tellers gift card to boot.

"I just want people to have a new experience," Vilella said, "instead of the same old, same old."



Paulo Vilella