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Wine Watch

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By Chelle Koster

While wine sales have flattened nationwide, the wine scene here continues to boom. Never has there been a more exciting time of our resident wine programs. With world-class wine festivals, award-winning menus that rival major metro areas, and a healthy stock of trained somms, wining and dining is elevated to an art in this region. So, what makes a wine program toast-worthy? Sure, the accolades and resident sommelier rankings are quantifiable factors, but its the je ne sais quoi that clinches the honor. Fortunately, we have plenty of restaurants and bars that deliver on both fronts.



BLEU PROVENCE

The godfather of wine in Southwest Florida, Jaques Cariot maintains a steadfast commitment to preaching a wine-spiked gospel at Bleu Provence. "We believe that it is our responsibility to educate, expose and share," says Jacques, whom along with his wife Executive Chef Lysielle, selects the wines with three on-staff sommeliers. Even before the wine festivals, he was introducing diners to the virtues of fine wine from his charming, cottage-like bistro in Crayton Cove. "It wasn't just Naples that was a no-wine's land," he says. "It was the whole state of Florida." Early on, Cariot was the only one who could procure exclusive Florida sale of less-mainstream French wines. Today, the team continues to impress with its wine tastings and pairing dinners that pull from a selection of 40,000 bottles and 4,000 varieties. They're able to keep prices reasonable thanks to its on-site retail operation. Fall in love with one of the vinos during dinner, and you can walk over to the cellar to grab a couple of bottles to take home. Several restaurants in our region have received nods from the lauded Wine Spectator restaurant award system, but Bleu Provence is the only one to receive the top Grand Award, which is only granted to 100 restaurants a year – and it has done so five consecutive years.