

San Antonio Business Journal - October 5, 2009  
[/sanantonio/stories/2009/10/05/smallb1.html](#)



Friday, October 2, 2009

## Vela Wine Bar is an urban oasis in Alamo Heights

San Antonio Business Journal - by [Catherine Dominguez](#)

Local entrepreneur Nelly Mendoza Olsen has taken the concept of wine and dine and turned it into one of Alamo Heights' most happening hot spots.

Olsen opened **Vela Wine Bar**, located next door to **Paloma Blanca**, last October and despite a few hurdles says the bar has turned out to be a dream come true.

"My brother (Jose Romulo Mendoza) and I had this idea about having a wine bar," Olsen recalls. "We wanted to do the wine bar because it is needed in Alamo Heights. There are wine bars downtown and wine bars on the north side of town, but there wasn't anything around Alamo Heights."

Today, the small, quaint bar attracts dozens of people each night giving the urban crowd a unique place to sit back and enjoy good wine.

"Alamo Heights needed a chic, romantic place, something small and cozy where young couples could come and have a drink," Olsen says.

Olsen, who is also the vice president and general manager of Paloma Blanca, says the relationship between the restaurant and the bar has been great for both businesses.

"It is great, it is right next door so we can have the same clientele and it complements Paloma Blanca," she says.

### A concept uncorked

Olsen, who grew up in Veracruz, Mexico, came to the United States at the age of 17 and began working at Paloma Blanca as a hostess and speaking very little English. Over the next few years, Olsen worked her way up into the executive ranks at the restaurant.

Olsen says that two years ago, she pitched the idea for a wine bar to Richard Peacock Jr., the owner of Paloma Blanca.

"I was first a little skeptical," he says. "(The wine bar concept) is such a different thing. But the more Nelly talked about it and gave me her vision, the more it seemed like a fun thing."

Peacock, who is also part owner of Vela, admits there was a void in places that people could go for a night club atmosphere without the loud, smoky environment. He adds that when the space next to Paloma Blanca became available, he says it was a natural move to transform that space, only about 1,000 square feet, into Olsen's wine bar.

Olsen says she wanted the wine bar to mimic a more urban scene, something that might be found in Miami or New York. With contemporary leather furniture, Vela is lit with dozens of faux candles to reflect the name of the bar, which means "candle" in Spanish.

While Peacock declined to give details about his investment in Vela, he says building out the bar was more costly than he originally planned. However, he says investing more in the look of the bar has proved to be a blessing.

And as for the real driving force behind Vela, Peacock says Olsen was very determined to ensure the success of the bar.

"She is hard-headed, more hard-headed than me," Peacock quips. "I'm really proud of Nelly."

### A glass half full

Olsen and her brother have traveled to Napa, Calif., to tour several vineyards to learn about various wines and to help shape Vela's wine list.

"Our wine list is pretty heavy on California wines," she says.

However when Vela first opened, the economy began to decline and Olsen admits she made a mistake in having too many high-end wines on the wine list. Most people, she says, prefer to enjoy a more mid-priced wine, usually between \$30 to \$80.

"With the economy, people just weren't buying those high-end wines," she says.

Serving appetizers was also a challenge for Olsen, who wanted to steer away from traditional Mexican food. But because most people knew that Vela was connected to Paloma Blanca, Mexican food is what they expected to see on the menu.

"People kept asking for it," she says. "So now I'm a little more open minded."

Olsen has tweaked the menu and the wine list and has even added other cocktails, including margaritas, cosmopolitans and a Cuba libre.

Olsen says the wine bar, which seats about 30 people inside and more on the landscaped patio, will have over 100 customers a night.

"It's a neighborhood wine bar," says Phyllis Viola, a local civic volunteer in the Alamo Heights area, of Vela's Broadway location. "It has great ambiance; it's very relaxing."

Viola says the bar has been a great addition to the area and says it has become a favorite for her family.

Olsen says now that the word has spread about Vela, the community has embraced the concept. In fact, Olsen says Vela has been a popular place for community groups to host meetings and parties.

"It has been received well," she says. "We are seeing more people now. We are getting a regular clientele and that is very important."

*All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.*