

Pub Crawl — Vela Wine Bar

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COURTESY ROSS RUEDIGER

Vela Wine Bar has a distinctive look to go with its selection of wines and light-dining fare.

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Address: 5800 Broadway

Hours: 4 p.m.-midnight, Tuesday-Sunday

Phone: (210) 822-7120

Snapshot: Vela Wine Bar, which opened a little more than a month ago next to Paloma Blanca Mexican Cuisine in Alamo Heights, is such a beautiful space — elegant glass front window, rows and rows of lights that glow like candles, green-lit jewel of a bar and large, clear vases filled with tall grass — you'll want to linger outside and just stare. Snap out of it! Once inside and settled, you'll discover a wine-drinking and light-dining haven that's unique, delicious and so warmly satisfying you won't want to leave. The seating areas — inside and on the front veranda — are comfy, particularly the sectional leather couch near the entrance. Romulo Mendoza, who owns Vela with his sister, Nelly Mendoza Olsen (they're also co-managers of Paloma Blanca), said he fell in love with the wine business on a trip to Palmaz Vineyards in Napa Valley. The result of his adventure is Vela, an elegant but casual place where anyone partial to the grape can find an impressive selection of still wines and Champagnes.

Behind the bar: My better half and I sampled three wines during our first visit that were reasonably priced and utterly delicious: the hard-to-find Red Rock Merlot and Murphy Goode Sauvignon Blanc at \$7 a glass, and the slightly more upscale Maso Canali Pinot Grigio for \$8. Friendly and stylish server Allie Pryd assisted us with our choices. Bottles of these and other varieties can be had for between \$22 and \$360. For special occasions, you might want to order one of the richest reds available — a Barolo at \$85 a bottle. On certain days, you can sample several varieties without breaking the bank. Wine "flights" usually consist of two whites and two reds and are paired with appetizers for a steal at \$15. My favorite piece of news: Wednesday is the day to celebrate at Vela. Order any bottle of Champagne that day — including Dom Perignon and Cristal — and get it for half price.

Who goes there? Patrons range in age from 21 to 50-plus. Many live in the Alamo Heights or Terrell Hills area. Some stop in before or after dinner at Paloma Blanca. How to dress for a night here? Comfortable but stylish — "snappy casual" was how the bartender put it. You know: jeans, cool tops, jackets, boots, sandals, etc. Note: Smokers should choose the patio, where lighting up is allowed.

Munchies: Where do I begin? You'll feel as if you stepped into an upscale cocktail party. Shrimp in butter-garlic sauce, salmon pizza and olive trays are just a taste of what's offered. Cheese lovers will adore the Around the World Fine Artisan Cheese plate, for \$24, which features five international cheeses — including German Rauchkase, English Huntsman and Italian Ragusano — and a serving of Italian figs. We savored the Chipotle Hummus (\$9) with pita bread, a garbanzo bean spread with avocado-infused olive oil and chipotle pepper that's not only a treat for the taste buds, but surprisingly filling. Those after dessert should try the Swiss chocolate/fruit fondue or chocolate truffles.

Fun and games: None; just conversation and incredible wines.

Soundtrack: The CD mixes played are upbeat but not overbearing, and with a European flair. A piece that caught our ears was from Belgian band Hooverphonic.

The skinny: Vela, which calls up the image of an understated chic candle, is a sophisticated, easy-on-the-eye sort of wine bar you might find in San Francisco or South Beach, Fla. Drop in during economical happy hour — 4-7 p.m. daily — or later for some light canoodling, friendly chat or a delicious mini-education in wines. It's a dream of a find you'll want to share with