

THE WINE UNDERGROUND

Altona in Norway has a long history – more than 400 years of it. Dr Stephen Quinn explores one of the world's oldest wine bars.

Anyone taller than 150 cm – about five feet in imperial measurements – risks banging their head as they enter the dining rooms at the Altona wine bar in Bergen, on Norway's west coast. But the risk is worth it because the Altona has one of the most famous wine lists among the Nordic nations.



Sommeliers Simon Valland and Beatrice Lie-Gjeseth Bendixen

Lavish list

The size of the doorways suggests that people were much smaller four centuries ago. The Altona is Norway's oldest wine bar. It opened in 1614. Most of the rooms in the associated restaurant are underground. The restaurant serves seasonal food and is highly rated on the Taste of Norway circuit.

Its wine list, in a hand-tooled leather case, weighs as much as a large telephone directory and provides extensive notes on more than 1,300 wines. The Altona has the largest wine list at any Norwegian wine bar, though the Restaurant Elysée in Voss, in Norway's Fjordland in Hordaland, claims to have Norway's biggest list, with more than 8,000 wines.

The Altona's list is legendary in terms of quality and the cellar bulges with fascinating wines from around the globe. It focuses on red and white Burgundy, Champagne and the Piedmont region. Sommelier Simon Valland

said the wine list was an expression of the tastes of current and former sommeliers. "I have a big affection for Piedmont and Champagne," he says. "The wine manager before me was a huge Burgundy geek."

Norway's citizens are forced to buy wines through the national wine monopoly, Vinmonopolet, which promotes a policy of removing the "private profit motive" from wine sales by being wholly owned by the state. Yet Norway has about 100 wine importers, and Valland buys all the wine through "a handful" of them.

A visit to the cellar is mandatory for any wine aficionado. It is deep under the building, cut in the rock of the Altona's foundations, and lit by dim lights. Ove Svendsen, a trainee sommelier who often visits, said the Altona was perfect for people looking for a wine bar with a large and classic wine list. "The cellar is a must visit. It's historic."

Valland describes the cellar as a "living, breathing thing". "As current wine manager I have the privilege to nurture it for a period of time. As well as I can have my influence on what ends up there."

Well priced

Wines are also offered for per-glass tasting. These sell for about 80.00 to 100.00 NOK (\$9.00 to \$11.00), vary each day, and are not on the main wine list. Valland and his assistant Beatrice Lie-Gjeseth Bendixen let clients sample wines before they buy. Valland and Bendixen trained at the Norwegian Sommelier School in Oslo and Bergen,

respectively. When Valland graduated at the age of 22 in 2013 he was the youngest sommelier in Norway.

Given the high level of tax on alcohol in Norway, prices are quite reasonable for the quality of the wine. A 1999 Tyrrell's Vat 1 Semillon sells for 650.00 NOK, and a 2007 Robert Weil Riesling for 600.00 NOK. Altona uses a fixed markup rather than adding a percentage of the original cost; the latter is typical at most Norwegian restaurants where wines cost four to five times the cellar price. "You will find better wines at far more affordable prices [here] than at other restaurants and wine-bars in Bergen," Bendixen said. Her expertise is German wines.

"Wine to and for the people," Valland added.

The entrance of the Altona greets visitors with an array of bright colours made by Kjetil Berge, a well-known Norwegian artist. Local artists made many of the wine bar's fittings, such as the table lamps created by Katrine Berg that resemble hovering airships. Most rooms have whitewashed walls and wooden beams, and are lit by candles, giving them a sense of romance and history.

Just make sure you don't bang your head on those small doorways. ■



The main dining room at the Altona.