

At Your Service

Raising the Bar

A connoisseur of wine and hospitality, Philip Natale aims to expand the wine experience for regulars and first-timers.

By June Naylor Photos by Ron Jenkins

Looking for the right territory for blazing his own trail, Philip Natale left upstate New York to launch his food-and-beverage career in the Lone Star State almost 25 years ago. And never has a place felt a better fit than Fort Worth does today. The general manager for Bob's Steak & Chop House and the adjacent Wine Thief bar at the downtown Omni Hotel, Natale also is a certified wine expert who speaks softly and knows his way around a wine list. He loves introducing guests to bottles that are approachable but unexpected. Doing so, he says, "gives us the opportunity to step out of the steakhouse mold."

The wine lists now feature Old World varietals, and he's bringing in classic vintages like the 1989 Chateau Cos d'Estoumel, an older, less often seen Bordeaux. Natale also is adding some five to six new wines each month.

Time spent at high-end Dallas restaurants like Steel and Hibiscus

provided Natale with an invaluable education, as did competing twice at the annual TexSom sommelier conference in Las Colinas and becoming a certified specialist of wine in 2006. In 2010, he was among elite sommeliers chosen for the first blending team at Napa's Raymond Vineyards.

After opening the Bob's Grapevine location exactly 10 years ago, he made one detour, to help open the New York

City Bob's. The Big Apple proved to be a challenging place to raise a family, and after less than two years, he and wife Katie — a former Four Seasons Las Colinas chef now teaching in a Fort Worth high school culinary program — moved their two preschoolers back to Texas. He joined Bob's in Fort Worth in 2015 (they live in the Alliance area).

"We couldn't get back to Texas fast enough. It's simpler here and feels like home. I've always loved the Texas culture, the independent spirit," he says.

While his GM duties keep him busy, Natale has had fun with the monthly tastings at the Wine Thief, a cozy wine bar with a spacious patio. For \$50, guests enjoy six pours paired with three small plates created just for the evening, each wine introduced by a sommelier or other expert brought in as a special guest.



"Our Greek and Portugal tasting was a big hit recently," says Natale. He's excited about June's event, pizza wines. "We will showcase a big variety, probably a white and a rosé, some with more acidity. Maybe a Beaujolais, maybe a syrah."

Chef Christian Marentes — who was Natale's sous chef at the Grapevine Bob's — works closely with his boss to fashion just the right dishes for the expanding wine selection, as well as for the cocktail nights that feature local spirits, such as Fort Worth's BLK EYE Vodka and the new Devils River Whiskey from Dallas.

The wine bar, which features a changing variety of hors d'oeuvres, buzzes nightly, thanks to not only its accessible location next to the Omni's lobby but also patronage from the residences atop the Omni and from other Fort Worth locals. One pair of regulars is hosting their rehearsal dinner there this summer.

"We love wine and the plush, relaxing ambiance there," says Omni resident Brian Dalton, whose July wedding weekend with fiancée Elizabeth Kearney includes a rehearsal dinner at Bob's. "We wanted something memorable in our building, and the great wine, the chef and personal touch of Philip and his staff are huge assets." **360**



Ask for a special bottle, and Natale will oblige.

THE DETAILS
Bob's Steak & Chop House and The Wine Thief Omni Hotel Fort Worth, 1300 Houston St., 817-350-4100 or omnihotels.com/hotels/fort-worth/dining/bobs-steak-and-chop-house

Wine tastings 6 p.m. on designated Wednesdays; \$50, email reservation to pnatale@bobs-steakandchop.com.

- June 14** Pizza wines
- July 19** A study of pinot noir
- Aug. 16** Tour of Washington state
- Sept. 20** An introduction to blind tasting
- Oct. 18** Fun steakhouse wines: no cabs

