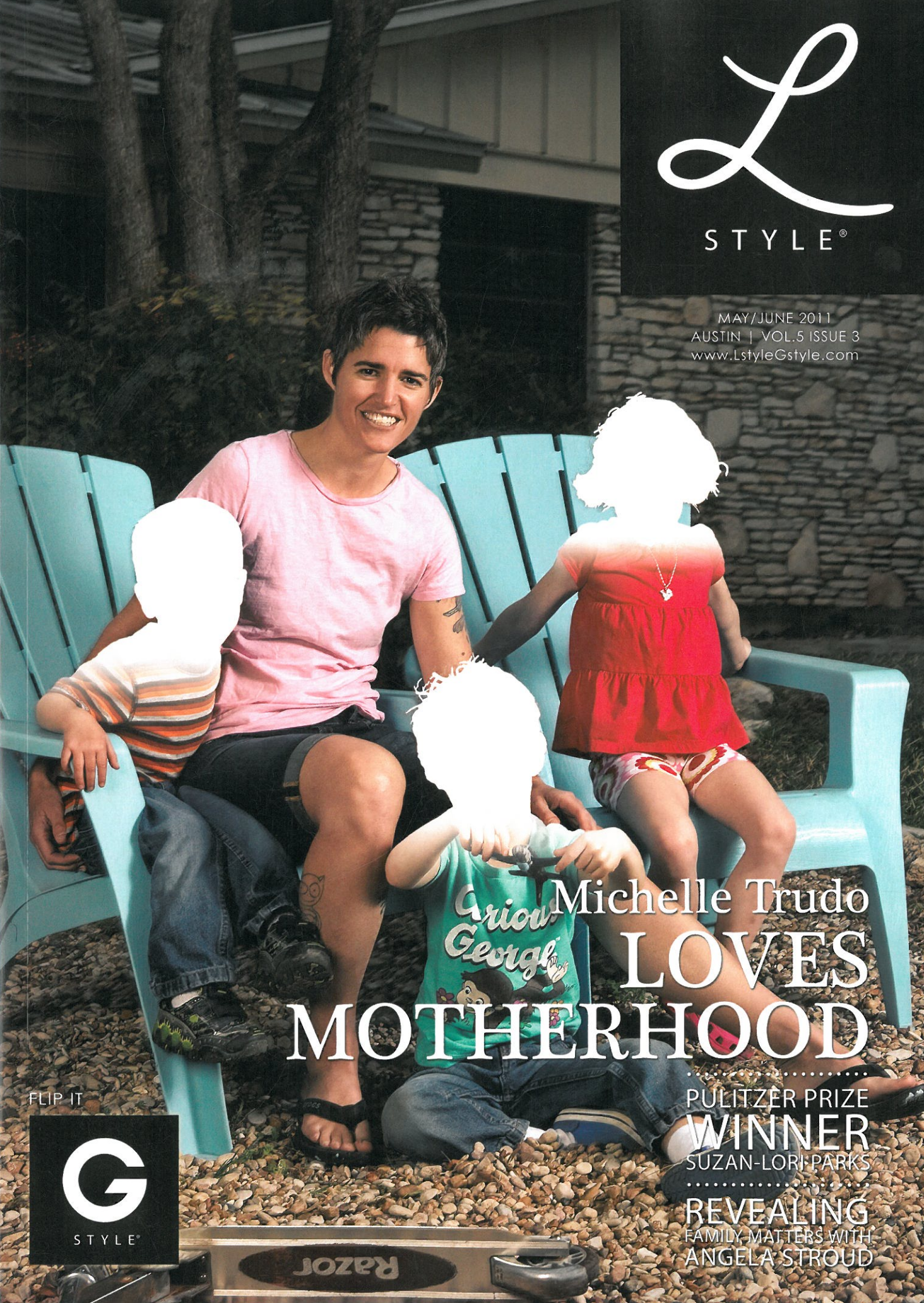


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TAPPED!

Who would have thought that great wine could come out of a tap?



BY CRISTIN "MOXY" CASTRO | PHOTOGRAPHY BY J. IVAN FIGUEROA



LOCATIONS BY NUMBER: 1. FRANK 2. WHOLE FOODS MARKET 3. SECOND BAR + KITCHEN 4. FRANK

You may have been looking in from the outside with one eyebrow raised the first time you saw wine on tap. What is going on?

In Europe, vino alla spina as it's called, has been apart of the daily fabric of life for decades. My favorite, La Vineria, run by my friend Aaron Brussolo, www.la-vineria.it/index.htm was my personal happy hour watering hole while living overseas. Like most of the Vineria and wine bars serving wine on tap in Europe and in South America, not only can you drink fresh wine at a very reasonable price, but the system cuts down on waste and ensures the wine is seasonal and very fresh. In addition, at the Vineria or dispensaries, you can fill bottles, growlers, or jugs not only with wine, but also with olive oil and vinegar. Why don't we have that at home? I thought.

Even though wine on tap has been around for a long while, strict alcohol laws and culture had to change before the U.S. came along.

It all comes down to this: Wine on tap ensures that there is no spoilage/corkage, as kegs use an inert gas to keep the wine fresh; it cuts down on cork, glass, packaging, and transportation waste; it ensures freshness; and it delivers wine at a better price.

Most people consider Todd Rushing, partner at Two Urban Licks in Atlanta, to be the godfather of wine on tap in the U.S. I remember seeing his wine barrels and taps about five years ago. About that time, there was also a spot in the heart of Michigan's wine country. Then others on the coasts started to get curious. Eric Asimov wrote an article in *The New York Times* in 2009 that started to turn a larger population and other restaurateurs and sommeliers on to the idea.

And so wine on tap is an idea whose time has finally come in Austin with Whole Foods Market's Bar Lamar, David Bull's restaurant The Austonian, and Frank leading the way.

For Whole Foods Market, the idea of wine on tap was more than adopting a new system. In order to bring the idea to Austin, they changed the concept of their wine department; installing the Bar Lamar wine and beer bar and even installing custom designed tap handles for it.

The tap handles are an interesting sidebar. On the coasts it may be less about brand, but here in Texas where our own myths are as big as our ideas and our hats, they thought it was necessary—and playful—to visually draw people's attention to what was going on and give people a strong name that could be remembered and used to create a word-of-mouth buzz about the wines on tap that would stick.

"To keep with our values, we went searching—not just for any wine on tap, but for the best seasonal product we could find. Like everything else we do here, we imagine that the wines, some custom made for Whole Foods Market, will follow like any good menu. We'll be done with the first batch and on to the next one, and it will be fresh and seasonal," said Jen Powell, Whole Foods Market's Lamar wine buyer and team leader. "I set out with two aims—make a unique invitation and create deliciousness."

To do that, they have created a special menu that incorporates their tap wines

into thematic flights paired with other wines on the bar and with the option to buy 1,2,3's (add-on fresh snack items from Whole Foods Market's other departments served as pairings for \$1, \$2, or \$3, along with larger portions of cheese, chocolate bark, almonds, olives and more).

Choosing the sourcing, in keeping with the philosophy of Whole Foods Market, was a process and a labor of love. "We chose wine-makers we believe in, such as Dan Fitzgerald, who was the winemaker for Williams-Selyem, and Dave Riley, the winemaker for local winery Duchman Family," said Powell.

At the wine bar you can also get great handcrafted microbrews on tap, which can be filled and refilled on site. For now, we will have to wait for that Vineria concept to land in the U.S. Current regulations prevent filling and refilling wine on site for off-site consumption. Currently that is only allowed at the Natural Process Alliance in Santa Rosa, California. Let's hope we don't have to wait too long in Texas.

In a sampling of the wines, the highlight is the Bench Pinot Noir made by aforementioned Dan Fitzgerald, and until there is a fill and re-fill program, Whole Foods Market also has it bottled, so you can take the wine home if you like it.

At Congress, where the wine program is led by the thoughtful and talented sommelier June Rodil, the idea of being able to pour vintage, varietal specific, appellation designated wines on tap was an essential part of the build-out of Bull's new restaurants in The Austonian. "The thought process behind the entire wine list, including wine on tap, was to create a list of wines, not of brands, and this is true for the wines on tap as well."

"There is a resurgence of restaurants in Austin. People are willing to change and grow. Like us, instead of leaving Austin for bigger pastures, we are traveling and using our wide experience to bring what's best to Austin and to put our own twist on it. People are not scared to try new things. We are not emulating, but finding what's fresh in this context," Rodil said.

At Frank, wines on tap are about freshness and keeping it nice and easy—since Frank was born and bred on the concept of local artisan meats and sausages made in-house or locally by Hudson Sausage company, and is known also for its high brow and low brow beers. As Frank's owner Daniel Northcutt likes to say, "wine is to a sausage as beer is to a dog."

Frank is pouring a red and a rose off their taps currently and a white will follow shortly. ■

One of the questions that often gets asked is about the kegs themselves, is there a bladder inside, does the keg change the taste, how does it work? The kegs are made from either food grade plastic that can be recycled or of standard stainless steel, the keg standard that can be filled, emptied, and re-filled. A special grade of stainless steel is used for the actual parts that connect the kegs to the lines to keep the higher alcohol wine from oxidizing.

Didn't someone already try this in the 70s with some cheap tasting party wine in a keg? Yes, Anheuser-Busch started a brand called "Master Cellars," essentially wine on a bar gun, bad wine made for 15.5 gallon party kegs—bad idea.

Who are the pioneers on the coasts pouring tap wine? Del Fina, The Slanted Door, City Winery, Spoon. For a larger list see: www.silvertapwines.com/Now-Serving/Where-to-Find-Silvertap.php