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Wyoming's FINEST

Jackson Hole's food and drinks scene is looking up thanks to multi-concept operator Fine Dining Restaurant Group

BY TERRI ALLAN



Gavin Fine is determined to position Jackson Hole, Wyoming as one of the top food and drink destinations in the country. And based on the results his Fine Dining Restaurant Group (FDRG) is seeing, the western Wyoming valley—located at the base of the Teton Mountains and known for its stunning views, iconic ski resorts, and upscale boutiques—is well on its way.

“We’re looking to push the envelope and to make Jackson Hole a food-and-drink-centric hub,” says Fine, owner of the 17-year-old, multi-concept restaurant group. “When I opened my first restaurant, all I heard about was Aspen, Park City, and Vail as top western U.S. food-and-drink destinations. But the people who

Gavin Fine was inspired to begin his culinary career after enjoying wine and tapas while studying in Spain. Opened in late 2017 in Hotel Terra, Bar Enoteca (interior above) draws on that experience, offering wine and small plates (food and wine options bottom and top left).

visit Jackson for its mountains and serenity also want the finer things.” And for nearly two decades, Fine and his group of restaurants have pursued a mostly European approach to dining, moving the needle on the area’s culinary and drinks reputation. “Our culture has come such a long way in the last 20 years,” Fine says.

That transformation has certainly benefitted FDRG, the operator of four full-service restaurants in the Jackson Hole



area, as well as two venues licensed to sell beverage alcohol for both on- and off-premise consumption and an established brewery/restaurant that is currently in the midst of relocating to the historic Jackson Town Square. Annual sales revenue at FDRG, which employs about 300 workers, is between \$15 and \$20 million. Food accounts for about 65% of sales, and beverage takes 35%.

Full-Fledged Foodie

A Chicago native and graduate of the Cornell University School of Hotel and Restaurant Management, Fine says he's been a foodie his whole life. "I've always felt comfortable in the

kitchen," he says. "I love the theater of restaurants as much as I love the food." But a semester spent studying in Spain sealed Fine's fate in the food and beverage world. "My time in Spain—eating and drinking in small tapas bars—and throughout Europe allowed me to understand the marriage and culture of eating and drinking," he says. "I loved that you could eat the food of one place and drink wine from the same region."

In 1996, at age 19, Fine set out for Jackson Hole with plans to stay for a year, but he never left. He worked at local restaurants, including Snake River Grill, where he met FDRG chef and partner Roger Freedman. The duo opened Rendezvous Bistro, a sophisticated but casual French-American restaurant,

Fine Dining Restaurant Group's Il Villaggio Osteria (pictured) opened in the Hotel Terra in 2008. The venue focuses on its wine bar and Italian cuisine (Mushroom Creste Rigate below left; Margherita pizza below right).



in 2001. “I tried to figure out what the people in Jackson wanted,” Fine says of his first venue. “At that time, the restaurant scene was made up of fancy restaurants and sandwich shops. There was no place where you could sit at the bar and get a dozen oysters or steak-frites. Wine lists were all value driven. So a bistro with a good wine list struck a chord with consumers here.” Q Roadhouse & Brewing Co. was unveiled in 2006, followed by Il Villaggio Osteria—located in the Hotel Terra in Teton Village and featuring Italian cuisine and a wine bar—in 2008. The Kitchen, a modern American eatery, opened in 2011, and the following year, the company debuted its two on- and off-premise hybrid venues—Bin 22 wine bar and bottle shop and Bodega specialty grocery, bottle shop, and bar. Late last year, FDRG unveiled Bar Enoteca, a restaurant

featuring wine and small plates and also located in the Hotel Terra.

“Jackson is a small town, so everything I’ve done is different and new,” says Fine of the decision to launch multi-concept venues. When creating a new business, he considers what consumers want, as well as what the town needs. Jackson is ideally located to attract tourists, whether it’s those skiing at the nearby resorts in the winter or the throngs of families who visit the Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks to the north in the summertime. But the local population is also vital. “There are more and more locals living here,” Fine says. “They’re our bread and butter. The tourists are the icing on the cake.” Indeed, FDRG wine and beverage director Neil Loomis says Jackson Hole is far more cosmopolitan than many believe. “Wyoming can often be far behind the trends of other areas,” he explains. “But Jackson is unique. It is the most food- and beverage-forward area of the state.”

Wine-Driven Concepts

Wine accounts for 60% of FDRG’s beverage sales, according to Loomis, followed by spirits at 30% and beer at 10%. “Our beverage program keeps evolving—we like to keep it fun and innovative,” says Loomis, who was the first employee hired by Fine 17 years ago. As a result, wine lists, cocktail menus,

PHOTOS BY (TOP) JAY NELMINTOSH; (BOTTOM) KENDRA ALESSANDRO



and beer offerings are frequently updated. “The rosé trend is huge,” Fine says, adding that Sicilian varietals, including Don Cosimo wines from Sicily, which FDRG imports for exclusive sale, also perform well at the concepts. For spirits and beer, however, he says “the trend is local, local, local. Three out of four customers are willing to try a local or regional spirit or beer.” He points to products from the likes of Wyoming Whiskey and FDRG’s own Roadhouse Brewing Co. as examples.

Loomis describes the wine list at Rendezvous Bistro as “French-influenced, and containing the most imported wines



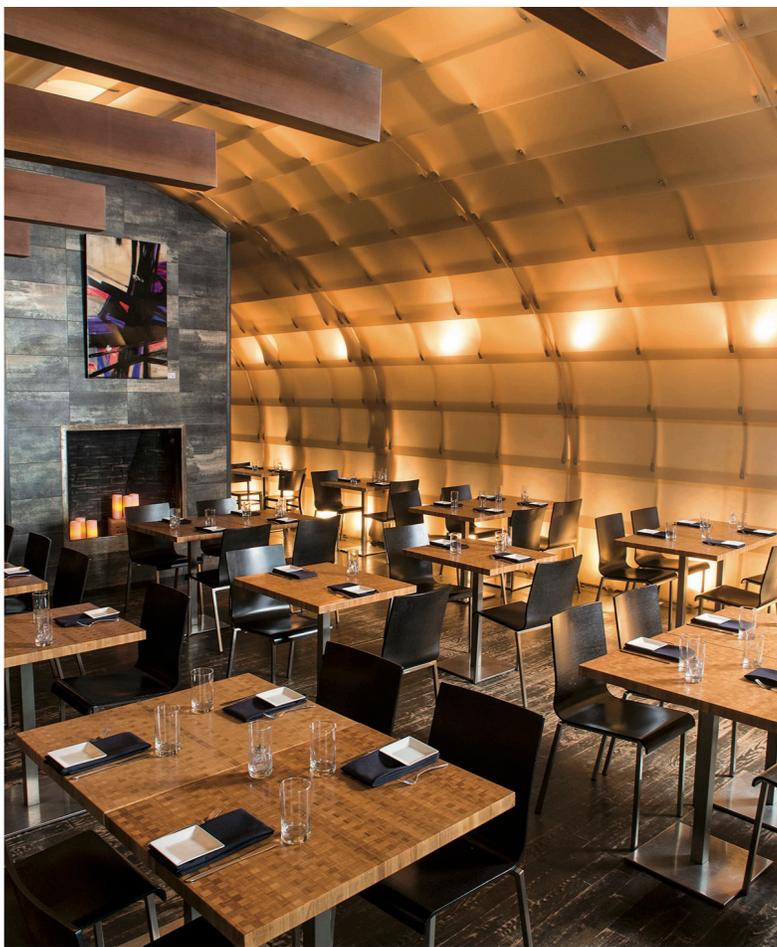
One of two on- and off-premise hybrid shops from Fine Dining Restaurant group, Bin22 wine bar and bottle shop (bar pictured top; wine store selection above) sells hundreds of bottled wines, many found in the group’s restaurants, and also offers 20 wines by the glass.

FINE DINING RESTAURANT GROUP AT A GLANCE

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Key Executives | Owner Gavin Fine; chef and partner Roger Freedman; and wine and beverage director Neil Loomis |
| Headquarters | Jackson Hole, Wyoming |
| Number of Units | Six licensed on- and off-premise venues and one brewery/restaurant |
| Locations | Jackson Hole |
| Annual Revenue | Between \$15 and \$20 million |
| Sales Breakdown | Food makes up 65% of overall sales, with 35% going to beverage. Wine accounts for 60% of beverage sales, spirits for 30%, and beer for 10%. |
| Website | Jhfin dining.com |
| Future Plans | Roadhouse Pub & Eatery will open in a new location this summer, and Fine says he’ll continue to pursue new opportunities in Jackson Hole and perhaps beyond. |

of any of our restaurants.” Offerings on the 135-bottle list range in price from \$26 to \$240, with 13 wines poured by the glass (\$9.25 to \$13.50). More than 20 wines are additionally available on the eatery’s reserve list, priced from \$125 for 2010 Roche de Bellene Nuits-Saint-Georges Pinot Noir to \$1,150 for the 2011 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Romanée-Conti. The venue mixes ten specialty cocktails (\$11), with the Pomegranate Martini—a blend of Three Olives orange vodka and a pomegranate and lime juice mix—the most popular.

The wine list at Il Villaggio Osteria, meanwhile, leans heavily on Italian offerings, with by-the-glass listings (\$10-\$25) exclusively Italian. The nearly 140-strong bottle list does, however, include California Cabernet Sauvignons, such as the 2013 Opus One (\$500 a 750-ml.). Other offerings range from the 2015 Scarpetta Pinot Grigio (\$30) to the 1982 Gaja



Opened in 2011, *The Kitchen* (interior picture above left) is a modern American eatery that prominently showcases seafood (scallops top right) and boasts a wine list of over 85 selections, as well as a cocktail menu with ten signature drinks. With each additional venue, owner Gavin Fine (above middle) and wine & beverage director Neil Loomis (right) look to bring something new and unique to Jackson Hole.

Barbaresco (\$780). Of the venue's ten specialty cocktails (\$12-\$16), the Top Shelf Negroni, featuring Barr Hill gin, Campari aperitif, and Carpano Antica vermouth, tends to be customers' favorite, Loomis says. At the adjacent Bar Enoteca, 20 wines by the glass (\$8-\$19), mainly Spanish and Italian, are offered, while bottles can be ordered from the Osteria list. The venue features three signature cocktails (\$12), including the crowd-pleaser Limoncello Frizzante, which mixes Jackson Hole Still Works' Highwater vodka, Árvoro limoncello, Scarpetta Prosecco, and house-made rosemary-black pepper syrup.

With seafood prominent on The Kitchen's menu, white wines fare well. The wine list includes 87 selections by the bottle—ranging from the 2016 Mud House Sauvignon Blanc (\$27) to the 2012 Mondavi Napa Continuum Cabernet Sauvignon (\$380)—and ten pours by the glass (\$9.50-\$17). A list of ten signature cocktails (\$11-\$13) includes the popular Coconut Ginger Martini, made with Stolichnaya vodka, Malibu rum, ginger beer, and lime.

Q Roadhouse & Brewing Co., meanwhile, is being transformed into the Roadhouse Pub & Eatery and is relocating to Jackson Hole's Town Square, with an expected opening date this summer. Colby Cox serves as brewmaster and is Fine's partner in the concept. Roadhouse brews are now available in Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, California, and Tennessee, with more growth to come, according to Fine. "Our plan is to grow two states a year for the next five years," he says.

Restaurateur Turned Retailer

Fine expanded into off-premise sales so that his restaurant guests could purchase the wines they loved at his restaurants at retail. Just steps from Jackson Hole's Town Square, Bin 22 stocks hundreds of wines for retail sale, generally priced from \$10-\$200. Loomis says \$20-\$40 selections tend to be the sweet spot. The bottled wines can also be consumed on site with no corkage fee, "This allows guests to get a \$14 Malbec that they would have to pay \$25 to \$30 for at other locations," he notes. Bin 22 offers some 20 wines by the glass (\$10-\$16), a few signature cocktails featuring locally produced spirits (\$10-\$12), and draft Roadhouse brews (\$6-\$7 for 16-ounce pours). Bodega, meanwhile, sells beer, wine, and spirits for off-premise consumption, and features a small bar. "We sell good local and regional craft beers, as well as major beer brands and Mexican imports," Loomis says, with crafts generally priced at \$10-\$13 a 6-pack. The bar serves draft Roadhouse beers (\$6-\$7 a 16-ounce pour), draft wine (\$7), and drinks known as sloshies (\$7). "They're a Wyoming thing," Loomis says of the popular frozen adult drinks.

Fine plans to continue to build upon his success in Jackson Hole. He says he's willing to open venues beyond the area but notes, "In this business, an owner has to be around." Wherever he decides to grow his business, Fine says that beverage alcohol will remain a big—and sometimes central—component. Pointing to the marriage between food and drinks, he says, "Sometimes the star of the show is the food; sometimes it's the drinks." And that development, particularly in a place like Jackson Hole, is "really cool to see."



PHOTOS BY (LEFT & BOTTOM CENTER) LATHAM JENKINS; (TOP RIGHT) KENDRA ALESSANDRO; (BOTTOM RIGHT) JAY NELMCINTOSH