



### **Successful Businesses Built On A Passion for All of the Good Things in Life**

"I love good wine, good food and good company," said Jerry Lasco, founder and CEO of The Tasting Room and MAX's Wine Dive. "We've built our business with a passion for enjoying all that life has to offer, and fortunately we hit at just the right time, as an interest in wine began taking off."

Talk about being in the right place at the right time. Lasco, a former military and commercial pilot, opted for a career change shortly after moving to Houston and being furloughed after 9/11. He and wife Laura chose to follow their passion for fine wine and food and open The Tasting Room Wine Cafe at Uptown Park ("TTR") in September 2003. A year later the movie *Sideways* opened and everyone, it seems, started embracing the wine culture.

So successful was TTR, that the company, named "Houston's Best Wine Bar" by *Playboy* magazine, Houston's "Best Date Place" by the *Houston Press*, and Houston's "Ultimate Wine Bar" by the *Houston Chronicle*, opened two more locations in the trendy Midtown and River Oaks areas. All serve fantastic artisanal cheese and charcuterie plates, and the Uptown and River Oaks locations serve the best thin-crust gourmet pizzas in town. The Lasco's thriving business took a whole new turn in 2005 when they welcomed business partner Jonathan Horowitz, a local attorney, whose love for wine and food drew him out of the courtroom and into this exciting and challenging business. In late 2006, the trio took the concept a step further, creating MAX's Wine Dive in the ubër-hot Houston Heights area.

The *Wall Street Journal* singled out MAX's Wine Dive as "one of the most talked-about openings of the season," and it became an instant hit, heralded by the local and statewide press. This sexy spot, with its leather banquettes, 40-foot long bar, brick walls and Johnny Cash-cool jukebox, features over 150 fine wines and an open kitchen serving upscale, gourmet comfort food. Dishes include the now famous "Texas Haute Dog," featured in *Bon Appetite*, their award-winning Kobe beef burger topped with triple-cream brie (recently lauded as "Houston's Best Cheeseburger" by the *Houston Press*) and the much talked-about fried chicken. All

of these great offerings are made with fresh, mostly local, high-quality ingredients.

You know a restaurant is doing something right when other chefs show up to eat there. The food, the funky atmosphere and the amazing wine selection with retail-like pricing has made it a popular late-night spot for area chefs and industry insiders after a long day on the job. More recently, MAX's has added a Sunday brunch menu full of artisanal delights like wings and waffles and three-egg omelets made with local Texas cheeses. Building upon the great success of the first MAX's Wine Dive, the company is looking to expand the concept into cities like Austin, Dallas and San Antonio, as well as others nationwide.

Notwithstanding the success of MAX's, the three TTR locations continue to shine. During its four years, the Euro-chic Uptown Park flagship TTR has expanded from 1,000 to 7,600 square feet, and now includes Houston's first luxury wine bar room, appropriately called the Reserve Room. The bar at Uptown Park is one of the hottest see-and-be-seen spots in town, with live music several nights each week. All three TTR locations offer special events weekly, from \$5 dollar Saturday tastings to wine dinners, tastings and educational seminars and, more recently, farmer's markets. In October 2007, the partners launched Houston's first-ever week-long wine and food festival, the Houston Cellar Classic, to rave reviews.

But even when there's not a special event going on, Houstonians have taken to MAX's Wine Dive and the wine cafe scene at TTR like the second coming of air conditioning. All offer extensive and eclectic wine lists, with many limited edition boutique wines and unusual finds from around the globe. Every location offers wine by the glass, bottle or case, so you can enjoy your favorite wines on-premise or take them home with you. Those in the know sign up for TTR and MAX's e-newsletters, which announce the many great special events regularly occurring at each location. The best part is, if you're not sure what you like, the friendly oenophile on staff can make recommendations and offer you a sip to try before you buy.

"It's going to continue to grow," says Horowitz of TTR, MAX's and the wine craze in general. "There is more competition out there now, and that will be good for consumers. The prices are going down and wine and food lovers will have more choices." We can all toast the TTR's and Max's of the country for recognizing the need for providing fine wine and fabulous food in a fun, unpretentious atmosphere.