

The owners of any successful enterprise must adapt to market forces. Bernard and Sarah Bouissou bought an existing Ridgefield, Connecticut, restaurant in 2000 and set about merging inspired regional, seasonal French cuisine with top-quality service. Bernard's Restaurant became a destination dining experience, earning high praise from the *New York Times*, among other honors. Business grew yearly, and in December 2007—a time of plenty—the upstairs room was booked almost every night for corporate holiday parties or extended family events.

What a difference a year can make. In December 2008 the advance bookings were down—way down—to one private party a week. The couple realized that they had to recast their ambitions if they were to continue to succeed. In the midst of a dismal economy, the Bouissous transformed part of their brilliant, fine-dining venue into a lively, fun wine bar.

Necessity Spurs New Entity

Sarah's Wine Bar morphed from incipient idea to reality very quickly. An obvious goal was to get people into the restaurant at a time when financial considerations were burdening virtually everyone. The owners didn't want to dilute the primary dining experience that had made their restaurant successful or to alienate their loyal customers. But they did need to create a more affordable wine and dining option for the wine bar. They chose the 80-seat upstairs space in their stately nineteenth-century colonial, preserving the four elegantly appointed dining rooms downstairs, which accommodate 120 guests, for Bernard's fine-dining clientele.

Based on a no-frills, restaurant-survival budget, Sarah's Wine Bar opened in November 2008, but the Bouissous were prepared to close it temporarily for December if private- or corporate-party engagements picked up. Their investment was less than \$5,000, which covered new window treatments

and some painting. They borrowed leather chairs and a stand-up table from their home, and an artist in the family provided some inexpensive but attractive artwork for the walls. They recouped their cost in less than two weeks.

Strong Building Blocks

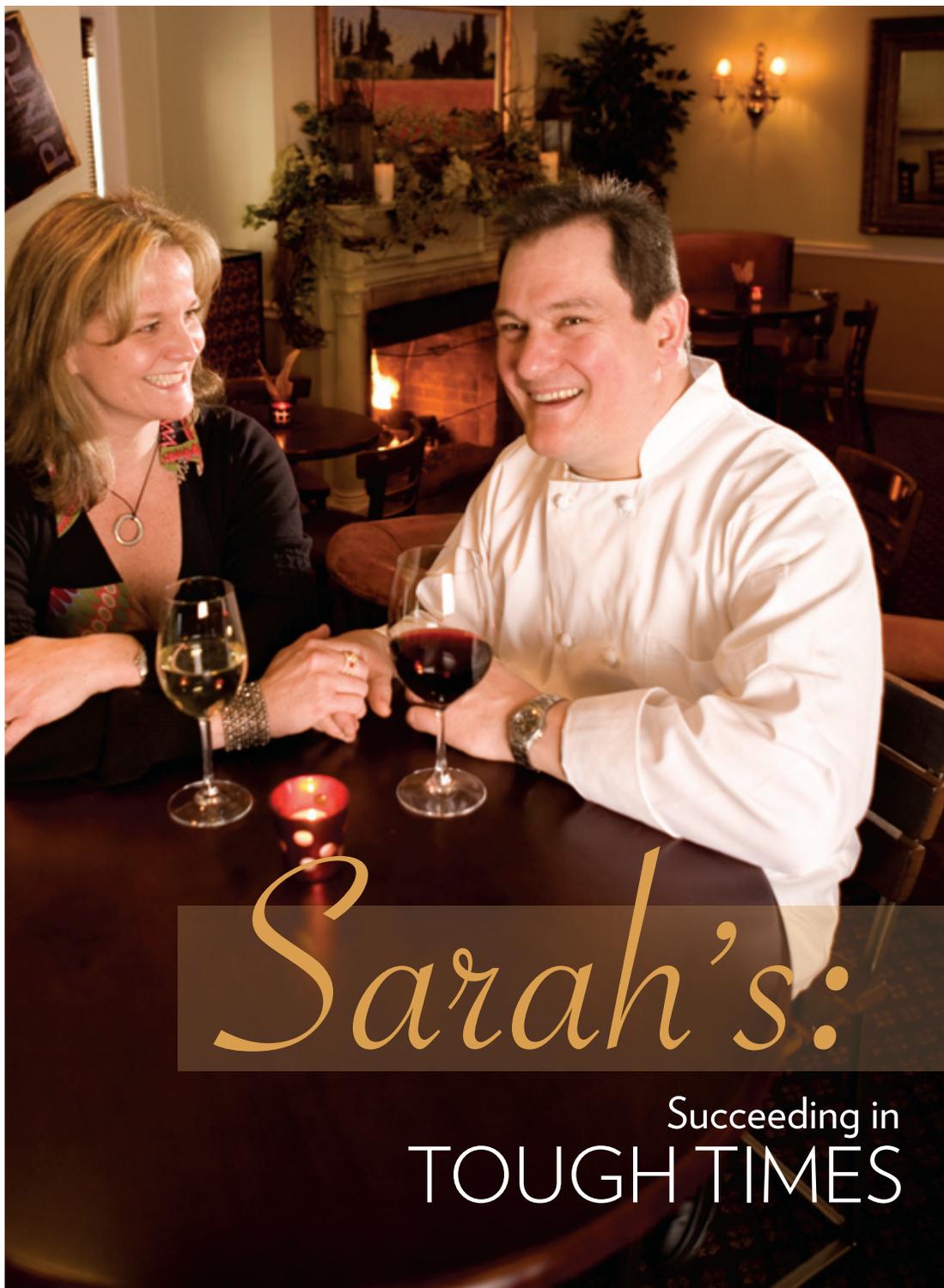
In conceiving Sarah's, the couple drew on Bernard's strengths: its exceptional wine offerings and the kitchen's stellar reputation. Twelve hundred labels grace Bernard's list, including 300 half-bottles. The by-the-glass price at the wine bar is the same as in the main dining room, and Sarah's offers a list of \$25 bottles that changes daily. The Bouissous take advantage of suppliers' discounts, often up to 50 percent on vintages that haven't moved. Bernard Bouissou will taste, buy, and pass the bargains on to his diners. His standard 2.5-times markup still applies, but his guests are purchasing a significantly better wine for \$25. The gifted chef also pulls out slow-moving wines or those that are reaching maturity from his regular wine list and discounts them upstairs. Sarah's offers five reds and five whites by the glass, and they are selling at such a brisk pace that a preservation system is not needed. At \$25, bottle sales are booming. It's common for a table of six to request three different bottles at once and conduct their own mini wine tasting.

Sarah's Wine Bar's food menu includes soups, salads, and starters such as home-smoked salmon and fried calamari. Gourmet French fries, baked Brie, cheese fondue du jour, and flatbread pizzas are very popular. In addition, Chef Bernard prepares mussels, grilled quail, lamb stew, and trout amandine, served as small plates or full

SARAH'S WINE BAR AT BERNARD'S RESTAURANT

20 West Lane
Ridgefield, CT 06877
203-438-8282
bernardsridgefield.com





Sarah's:

Succeeding in TOUGH TIMES

entrees. The kitchen and floor staff, headed by polished and personable Maitre d' and Sommelier Marco Albarracin and Dining Room Manager Richard Gill, freely make welcome and interesting wine suggestions to enhance the food. Since Sarah's opened, Albarracin has seen a dramatic change in the entire operation: "Regular customers who dined at Bernard's once a month are now seen weekly, or better. Sometimes they dine formally downstairs, sometimes casually upstairs. And they often don't decide until they walk in the door."

By Doug Paulding

Left: Sarah and Bernard Bouissou enjoy a happy and welcome break at Sarah's Wine Bar. Below: Food is an essential part of the experience, including (bottom) Bernard's popular Orange & Rosemary Lamb Stew with Creamy Polenta and Baby Vegetables (\$12/small plate; \$20/entree).





Here are a few of the 18 \$25/bottle selections on Sarah's list, which changes daily. The Bouissous include the grape varieties as a helpful guide for their guests.

:: WHITE WINE ::

2004 Venica "Collio," Friuli, Italy—Tokai Friulano
2005 Domaine Ehrhart, Alsace, France—Gewürztraminer
2004 Millbrook, New York State—Chardonnay

:: RED WINE ::

2000 Lydie & Max Cognard-Taluau, Saint-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil, France—Cabernet Franc
2005 Xavier Vignon "Xavier," Pic Saint-Loup, France—Syrah, Mourvèdre, Grenache
2007 Pie de Palo, Mendoza, Argentina—Malbec

Dynamic Demographic and Super Spinoff

This new dining experience has brought a new subset of diners to Bernard's, one that is significantly younger and more casually dressed. With a bar that seats ten, solo diners are no longer an endangered species. Sarah Bouissou also has seen an increase in organized groups—for example, book clubs, which will meet to discuss a recent book over wine and some appetizers or light entrees. Bernard's core diners still enjoy their special-occasion dinners downstairs, but some come in once or twice a week for a quicker, no-fuss meal upstairs. Regular diners may ascend the grand staircase for a pre-dinner drink or glass of wine and sit in the soft club chairs in front of the fireplace. There also has been a dramatic increase in the pre- and post-theater patrons, who arrive as couples or in larger groups. The previously untapped after-work crowd shows up for a drink and a bit of networking or socializing, and some stay for dinner.

Sarah's Wine Bar also has fostered a profitable marketing spinoff. Now when Sarah Bouissou is approached by an organization for a dinner donation, she declines. Instead she offers to support a wine-tasting event and creates a computer-generated invitation customized for the host charity. The organization e-mails the invitation to its mailing list, which usually guarantees a full house of 80 at the wine bar for that night.

Sarah collaborates with local wine store owner Monica Brown, who asks distributors to donate the wine for the tasting, and Brown offers discounted retail wine purchases at the event through her store. When asked what percentage of the upstairs special-event wine tasters order food, Bernard Bouissou responds, "One hundred percent." Wine-tasting fund-raisers are held every other Wednesday night, with the

entire \$10/person cover charge given to the charity. The Bouissous have made donations totaling many thousands of dollars, and Sarah's is now booked every Wednesday night through late spring.

Survival Mode

Since opening Sarah's, providing two very different food offerings out of one kitchen has been the most significant hurdle for the couple to overcome. Retraining the kitchen staff to cook and coordinate two distinct menus that require a very different tempo of service took some time to perfect. The owners were nervous about alienating their regulars, and there were some bumps in the road early on, most significantly, determining staffing needs upstairs and outlining kitchen routines to satisfy the two menus.

But the restaurant and wine bar established its new rhythm quickly. Relying solely on word of mouth, the Bouissous have found a way to significantly enhance their bottom line, turn an underutilized space into a bustling and exciting area, expose wine bar customers to the restaurant for special-occasion dining, and create a "close out" area to move wines that may have remained unsold in their cellar. Bernard confesses, "We have a big operation here. Despite our reputation, business was way off. This saved the restaurant. Sarah's brings a lot of people through the door."

The Bouissous' notion was simple: if we build it, they will come. Sarah notes, "There is nothing like this around here, and the beauty of it is we can try all sorts of new things, such as new food items or music nights. If it doesn't work, we change it. Simple."

Doug Paulding is a Metro New York City-based journalist and a *Santé* wine review panelist.