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This wine's wild popularity is baffling Bay Area restaurant owners

By **Esther Mobley**, Senior Wine Critic

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The chilled red is unstoppable.

Even at a time when Bay Area restaurants are seeing [lagging red wine sales](#), the chilled-red niche appears to be thriving. Many establishments report that anything marked as “chilled red” on a menu becomes their most in-demand wine — notable continuity for a category that’s so malleable.

“Recently, oh my God, it’s like everybody wants a chilled red,” said Lalo Luevano, an owner of the San Francisco bars [Bodega](#), [Key Klub](#) and [Celeste](#), all three of which count chilled red as their best-selling category.

The popularity inspired Luevano to create a custom chilled red for Celeste, in partnership with Richmond winery [Les Lunes](#). They went through 15 cases of the wine — a blend of Nero d’Avola, [Valdiguie](#) and Grenache — in its first weekend. They then decided to create a second Les Lunes collaboration for Bodega (a Zin-Cabernet rosé-Carignan-Chardonnay), and it sold out too. “We burned through 320 cases in a matter of 2 ½ months,” said Luevano of the Bodega red. “That’s just pallets and pallets of chilled red.”

But what *is* a chilled red? Of course, any red wine can be put in the fridge, and all reds [should ideally be served](#) at least a little below room temperature. But some are better suited to a deep chill than others. The ideal candidates will be light in body and low in tannin. The concept proliferated in recent years thanks to natural wine bars, which sometimes serve reds cold because the chill can mask certain flaws.

Yet the phenomenon is not confined to natural wine bars populated by youths. It's even happening at [fine dining restaurants](#). Last year, red wines by the glass were slumping, but Saison wine director Molly Greene put a chilled Beaujolais on the menu, "and that helped," she told me in December. "We sold out of that by-the-glass in two weeks whereas it would normally take us a month."

Dan Polsby, an owner of [Best Friends in Albany](#), posits that we may have reached "peak chilled red." Five years ago, getting people to drink cold red wine was a tough sell, he said, but "now 'chillable red' may be the single most requested category" of red wine at his bar.

"Anecdotally, it seems like the only thing the youngsters are asking for," said Charlie O'Leary, an owner of [Rampant Bottle + Bar](#) in the Outer Richmond, where chilled reds have been the highest-selling items since opening night last September.

[Rich Table](#) wine director Kevin Born said the wines have "way eclipsed" the popularity of [orange wines](#), which looked ascendant a couple of years ago. Chilled reds seem to be more universally embraced than orange wines ever were: "People who would have had a white are having a chilled red now."

The current craze, however, risks sweeping up some wines that are not meant to be cold. "If you're putting a California Zinfandel that's made in a classic way into a bucket of ice," said Andrew Nelson, owner of [Golden Sardine](#) in North Beach, "I don't think (the people) know they're not supposed to drink it that way." Cold temperatures will make a big wine's tannins feel harsher, and they'll mute some of its nuanced aromas.

Just as a frosty temperature can disguise a wine's shortcomings, it can also subdue its charms. No wine should be served hot. But perhaps not every red wants to chill.

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