

STYLE AND TRAVEL

The wonder of it all

Jonathan Ray samples Selfridges' newly opened Wonder Room

Selfridges used to be my local. My wife and I have poured plenty of our hard-earned scratch into its coffers over the years (and, thanks to Marina's obsessive-compulsive handbag-buying disorder, not just in the Food Hall either), and I'm delighted to learn that they've been putting our moulah to good use.

In their largest-ever in-store project, the directors have shelled out a cool £10 million to create a 25,000 sq ft luxury goods emporium dubbed the Wonder Room. It opens this weekend, and I'm told that even the most practised and hardest-nosed of shoppers are agog.

Cool, airy and light — thanks to the enlarged windows overlooking Orchard Street — the Wonder Room features an arcade of boutiques devoted to such fancy-Dan brands as Hermès, Tiffany, Chanel, Chrome Hearts and H. Stern. It boasts the UK's largest dedicated luxury watch-selling space; a remarkable 18-metre wall given over entirely to designer sunglasses (1,300 different examples); numerous state-of-the-art video installations; a regularly changing, celebrity-curated Seven Wonders of the World display and several jewel-crammed cabinets.

'Wonder has been missing from retail for a long time,' Paul Kelly, the chief executive, told me during my behind-the-scenes preview. 'I really do think that people are going to be blown away by what we've done and I can't wait for it to open. My life has been wished away for the last 18 months, longing for the big day.'

Tired, wizened old cynic though I am, I couldn't help but be impressed by the sheer opulence of it all. It does look fantastic. But is there really a market for £53,000 jewel-encrusted Nokia Vertu phones?

'You bet there is!' exclaimed Kelly. 'If you see something you like these days, you buy it. You might not be able to afford it, but you buy it, because if you don't someone else will.'



Jonathan Ray enjoys a sneak preview of the Wonder Bar

After much agonising, I decided against the phone — it wasn't Marina's colour — and took myself off to that part of the Wonder Room that is far more likely to enjoy my custom, the Wonder Bar.

Within seconds, I was seduced. Thanks to the ingenious Enomatic wine-serving system — which pumps nitrogen into opened bottles — and a simple pre-paid-card-in-the-slot method of paying, customers can help themselves to endless glasses at prices ranging from £3.20 (for 2004 Chapel Down Bacchus) to £99.99 (for 1990 Château d'Yquem).

There are 52 wines on offer, served in either 125ml or 175ml measures. Selfridges' initial plan to sell sips of 25ml and 75ml has been scuppered by those unenlightened jobsworths at Westminster City Council. Apparently, even in this age of binge-drinking, it is against the law to sell wine in lip-moisteningly uplifting sizes such as these. Before the buffoons came to slap their wrists, Selfridges had been doing a roaring trade in 25ml of 1996 Château Petrus at £32 a pop. And how many of us could afford this liquid gold at £950 a bottle?

So excited was I by the goodies on show that I immediately phoned my old mate Mark Tower and bullied him into joining me. I bought a pair of Wonder Bar cards

and charged them up with £50 apiece. Mark, though, wasn't impressed.

'It's a bit like a fag packet machine,' he grumbled. 'Or a petrol pump. Where's the romance?'

I told him to get a grip and poured a glass of 2003 Isabel Estate Sauvignon Blanc from NZ (£4.10) and one of 2005 FMC Chenin Blanc from South Africa (£5.20), which we shared. Then a glass each of 2005 Tapanappa Chardonnay from Australia (£7.50) and 2004 Henri Boillot Meursault (£15).

Mark suddenly got it. 'Crikey, what a brilliant concept!' he said. 'These are delicious, and

for impoverished gents like me who can't afford a whole bottle, it's a bloody marvelous idea. What are we having next?'

Our 50 quid each soon ran out, and we added more to the cards as the afternoon slipped gently away from us. We sampled well over a dozen different wines (the highlight being the stunning 1999 Ornellaia from Tuscany at £25.85), and I'm pretty sure we also had something nice to eat.

Of course, the danger inherent in the Wonder Bar is that average middleweight alcoholics like Mark and me will never leave. Every time we got up to go, one of us would spot another treasure and decide that the other simply had to try it.

And once we finally did make our escape, Mark was struck by a splendid idea. 'Do you think they'll give us a certificate if we manage a glass of all 52?' he asked with a loud hiccup.

Jonathan Ray is wine editor of the Daily Telegraph.

SELFRIDGES, LONDON

400 Oxford Street, London W1A 2LR
Tel: 0800 123 400
www.selfridges.com