



That's the Spirit!

Get sampling and stay competitive, it's wine-tasting season

BY ALAN MCGINTY

Here's a fun way to boost your margins: spend an afternoon sampling wines and enjoying a buffet while chatting with colleagues at a trade tasting. Not only will you improve your wine list, you'll be doing small wine producers a favour too.

In cities across the country, another season of trade tastings has begun — and restaurateurs and their staff are favoured on guest lists. Trade tastings are ideal for finding good, moderately priced wines that are unavailable on the general list of the provincial liquor boards or other retail outlets. Simply put, the consumer is unaware your terrific California Cab — at \$6.95 a glass — costs only \$11.25 a bottle because it's only available on consignment. Small producers are keen to have you sample their wine because, if they are not on the liquor board lists, they can only sell through agents outside of free-market Alberta. (But even in Alberta, they want you to attend.)

Virtually all trade tastings take place between 2 and 5 p.m. on weekdays, and many are themed according to region: Italian, Niagara or Okanagan, California, South Africa, et cetera. At most tastings, there are hundreds of wines ready to sample and admission is free to trade guests. However, at consumer events the same wines and cheeses you enjoy for free as an industry insider can cost up to \$50 per person.

"Tasting is really the single greatest teacher there is," says Peter Bodnar-Rod, manager of Mississauga, Ont.-based Trade Development and Wine Education for B.C.'s Mission Hill Family Estate. A sommelier for several years before joining

RED-HOT CONSIGNMENT WINES



Righetti Amarone della Valpolicella, Italy \$26.50

The Small Winemakers Collection of Toronto started in 1991. Its first supplier was Righetti — still its best seller. Amarone is an intense, full-bodied red from the Valpolicella region. Amarones are pricey because the grapes mature longer on the vine and, once picked,

are dried on wooden plates for up to five months before pressing. Peter Wearing, principal of Small Winemakers, explains Righetti's Amarone is lower-priced than any Amarone on the LCBO's general list: "Restaurants particularly like this because they can price it at a higher markup than normal and make a little extra on each bottle."

Leaping Horse Merlot, California \$13.50

Ironstone, a 5,000-acre vineyard in California test-marketed the Leaping Horse brand in 2002. Brad Coughlin, V.P. of Sales and Marketing for Ironstone says, "Trade tastings [helped us] get a lot of feedback from key buyers and [consequently] in February of 2003 we decided to go national." The quirky name, striking label and quality wine spelled instant hit. Sales of the brand rocketed from zero to 330,000 cases in the first year, earning a "Hot Brand" award from *Impact Magazine*. Their wines are among Toronto-based Lifford Wine Agency's best sellers. "We've been working hard at selling it," says Steven Campbell of Lifford's, "but it makes it easy when you've got a great product at a great price."



Echeverria Cabernet Sauvignon, Chile \$12.50

Lifford's Campbell and a colleague travelled to Chile's major wine fair to sample the country's many offerings, including the more expensive products of joint ventures with foreign firms such as Rothschild or Mondavi. "Echeverria was unbelievable.

They handpick the grapes and the winery is located right in the middle of the vineyard. They hand-sort all the grapes so only good grapes go into the wine. They've owned the land for a hundred years and have no costs: all the value is in the wine."



Mandolin Pinot Noir, California \$13.50

A winery in California was having trouble selling their Pinot Noir, so instead of dropping its price it sold its excess grapes to Mandolin Vintners. The result is a good Pinot Noir at a great price. One *Globe and*

Mail reviewer calls it "shockingly underpriced...it delivers Burgundian poise and subtlety in a delicate, medium-bodied frame." Small Winemakers says, "We were inundated with calls by private clients, but also a number of restaurant clients who realized they could sell it in their restaurants. It is now one of our best-selling wines."



Mission Hill. Bodnar-Rod is also a wine teacher. "The more you taste, the more styles and regions you expose yourself to, making you better-equipped to make buying decisions," he explains. "It helps you to make recommendations in the dining room if you're a sommelier or waiter, and to make wine and food matches if you're a chef."

Craig Davies, director of Purchasing for Vancouver-based Keg Restaurants, buys for approximately 70 branches across the country. He creates regional variation by ordering more Niagara wines for Ontario outlets and more Okanagan product for the West. Not surprisingly, his annual \$10-million wine budget attracts a steady stream of wine agents eager to sell. "The agents do a good job of keeping us up to date," Davies says. "But I still enjoy going to the trade shows, not necessarily to seek products, but to reaffirm where we're at. It's a nice recap of what's out there." A typical Keg wine list features approximately 45 labels, and Davies explains, wine is the second-biggest sales category at The Keg.

"I go to as many tastings as I can," says Andrew Cieszkowski, director of Wine and sommelier at the Four Seasons Hotel in Toronto. "Mainly because you can find plenty of off-list [consignment] wines." Cieszkowski also sees the tastings as an educational opportunity and regularly invites staff to attend. He benefits from their input too. "The staff have front-line contact with the customers, and this gives them a feel for what's popular and what will sell."

At the owner-operator level, trade tastings are essential to maintaining a good wine list. Shamez Almani, co-owner and general manager of La Palette in Toronto's Kensington Market, has about 200 wines on list at his quaint French restaurant. "I like going to the tastings to find something before it becomes popular and goes up in price — that's where you get value." Almani is currently seeing success with Chilean and Argentinean wines. "They're low on the price scale and high on the quality scale."

Almani says the tasting process is important for his staff's wine education and his own. "It's all about taste, taste, taste. There's only so much reading you can do. If you want to learn about wine, you've got to taste a lot of wine." There's a payoff for all this tasting at the bottom line because, says Almani, "you can spot a bargain right away, or an exceptionally well-made wine that's a little more expensive." A dynamic wine list also pays off with repeat business: a number of La Palette's regular customers specifically revisit to see what new wines are available.

On the other side of the table, trade tastings are an integral part of the marketing strategy for many winemakers. Piero Titone of the Italian Trade Commission explains. "When promoting new wines, it's hard to knock on 200 or 300 restaurant doors. These events allow for an agent or producer to meet many potential customers at once." Italy is wholly committed to wine marketing and, given that Canada bought \$218 million worth of Italian wine last year, it's important to market the famous winemaking country. "Every November, we hold the Italian Wine Tasting in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. In Alberta, we alternate between Edmonton and Calgary," says Titone.

France is Canada's number-one source of imported wine and the French shows are generally based around regions. "We often

**TEMPTING
TASTINGS
TO COME**



Wine fairs and tastings are hopping across the country this fall, with another round beginning mid-February.

October:

Italian Wine Tasting – Edmonton, Vancouver
 Rocky Mountain Wine and Food Festival – Calgary, Edmonton
 Sonoma County Wine – Toronto, Edmonton, Vancouver
 Vinos de España – Toronto
 Vintages Fine Wine Auction Tasting – Toronto

November:

Cornucopia Food and Wine Show – Whistler, B.C.
 Italian Wine Tasting – Toronto, Montreal
 Gourmet Food and Wine Expo – Toronto
 South African Wine Tasting – Toronto
 Newfoundland Wine Fest – St. John's, Nfld.
 Ottawa Wine and Food Show – Ottawa
 Port of Wines Festival – Halifax
 World Wine Festival – Moncton

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present wines that are not yet on the market, and agents present wines that are available only on consignment," says Caroline Allene, project manager at Sopexa, the marketing agency that runs the shows. "Not only is it something special or new, but also it's good because if the consumer does not know the price of the product, you can sell it for a bit more." Recently, Allene has observed a blurring of the lines between trade and consumer events. While Toronto's Gourmet Food and Wine show each November is consumer-oriented, Allene says more trade people are attending food and wine shows. Ottawa has a similar show, also in November, and France is the featured country this year.

Rick Slomka is the Canadian representative for the Wine Institute of California, which organizes the annual California Wine Fair. "It's the largest of its kind in Canada," says Slomka. "We visit between nine and 11 cities across the country, starting in February in the West, and mid-April in the East." Next year will be the 25th anniversary of the tour. This fall, Slomka is also doing a small tour on behalf of the Sonoma County Wineries Association. In early October, the tour is slated for Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver.

VANCOUVER PLAYHOUSE INTERNATIONAL WINE FESTIVAL

Insiders agree the Vancouver Playhouse International Wine Festival is the finest wine show in Canada. After passing through a selection panel, wineries from 15 countries attend the show with a rep on-site. Last year the event attracted a record 18,000 visitors at the Vancouver Playhouse and associated venues. In 2005 the wine blockbuster will celebrate its 27th anniversary.

The show is mainly consumer, but there is a significant trade component — last year more than 5,000 people attended the trade events. Be prepared to pay for this one: prices in 2005 start at \$29 for a single session. Multiple session pass prices have not yet been finalized, but last year the Trade Super Pass, which offered VIP access to many events and tasting over the course of the week, cost \$395.

Restaurateurs who feel confident about their wine list are invited to submit them for competition

during the show. Entries are judged for overall presentation, with emphasis on well-paired food and wine selections. In 2004, Gold awards went to the Bearfoot Bistro in Whistler, B.C., the Divino Wine and Cheese Bistro in Calgary, the CRU Wine Restaurant and La Terrazza in Vancouver, and the Sooke Harbour House in Sooke, B.C.

Wine agents are keen to encourage attendance at the wine tastings. Steven Campbell, owner and manager of Toronto-based Lifford Wine Agency, has strong words for restaurateurs. "An unfortunate statistic for this industry is the average [owner-operated] restaurant lasts less than a year. It has the highest bankruptcy rate of any business. So independent operators had better be doing their damndest to differentiate themselves from the competition. Anything you can do — whether it's service, decor, food, or an outstanding wine list — to distinguish yourself is an advantage. And if you're not paying attention to wine, you sure as hell better start."

In Ontario, the 6,813 labels available on consignment (which includes spirits, but which are mainly wines) dwarf the general list of 3,476 products. Even including the high-end Vintages division's 3,117 listings, more than half the total number of alcohol brands available in Ontario can only be purchased through agents. Campbell says exclusivity is a great selling point: "Go to the top restaurants in Toronto and try to find a general-list product. It's extremely hard." But it's easy — and enjoyable — to find good value off-list wines at various trade tastings around the country. Get tasting; your customers will thank you and your accountant will smile. ┘

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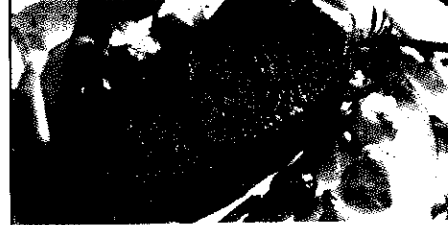
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