

Cork & Olive bringing retail wine stores to Orlando area
First Old World-style location set to open Nov. 1.
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by Bob Mervine

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With U.S. wine sales growing by 5 percent in 2005 to \$26 billion, combined with considerable economic growth, entrepreneurs continue to see a market for retail wine sales here.

The latest attempting to grab some of that business is Estate Wine Group Inc.'s Cork & Olive, a Tampa-area retailer with an eye toward growth. Last year, the company had only two outlets. It added two more during the year and has currently grown to nine locations, the closest to Orlando located in Lakeland. The company says it will open four more by year's end, with an estimated \$7 million invested in expansion.

Estate Wine Group founder and CEO Michael Probst, whose goal is to be "the Starbucks of wine sales," says he believes there is room for 20 to 30 Central Florida locations for his Old World-style Cork & Olive stores.

The first store, on Restaurant Row in Plaza Venezia near Roy's, will open Nov. 1. Other locations in development or under consideration include the Winter Garden Village near State Road 429 and County Road 535, McGuire Road near Windermere, Clermont, Altamonte Springs and the Alafaya Trail area near the University of Central Florida.

Up to 22 stores could be open or sold and in development here by the end of 2007, Probst says.

Warm atmosphere

The stores, averaging about 2,100 square feet, are designed to be neighborhood shops with a warm and comfortable atmosphere.

Probst, who was born in Heidelberg, Germany, and has lived in the U.S. for about 40 years, says the layout centers on a round tasting table, displaying an open array of five red wines and five wines chosen daily for sampling. The furnishings have a European feel with a clean comfortable look with no boxes or crates on the floor.

The inventory is relatively small, about 150 labels, with 80 percent of the sales coming from 50 labels. The average price is \$12 a bottle. Many come from small local or regional winemakers from diverse locations such as South Africa, Chile and New Zealand.

The staff, meanwhile, is trained to be personable and talk to customers in English, not wine-speak. Probst says he wants to have stories to tell customers about the wines.

"I want to know who the winemaker is," Probst says. "I want to see where the wine comes from."

Growth through franchises

Probst also has his sights set on franchising -- "a necessary part of growth," he says. But due to his age -- 60 -- he admits he doesn't have the time to grow it himself.

Enter Tom Ronzino, an Orlando businessman.

He was on vacation in St. Petersburg in 2004, staying at a bed and breakfast. The owner suggested he visit a nearby Cork & Olive, and Ronzino strolled in with his wife and left with two cases of wine. Two years later, he bought into the business and set up a franchise subsidiary,

Ronzino says Orlando is not the company's focus -- he just happens to live here. Plans call for expansion into Ocala, Jacksonville and beyond with 120 to 140 franchise locations in Florida in the next couple of years.

"To me, the concept was overwhelming from a marketing sense," Ronzino says. "The idea is that customers buy what they like, based on sampling the wines."

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