

CORK & BOTTLE

HOW TO BUY, TASTE AND STORE WINE AND SPIRITS

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Wine sales' newest vintage

Traditional connoisseurs, forget old expectations when you sample the new chain wine stores, where newcomers to wine can find strong notes of advice, enhancing a bouquet of personal preference.

By CHRIS SHERMAN, Times Food Critic
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[Times photos: William Dunkley]

Diane Ackerman, left, gets some expert advice from Lee Neal, founder of Pic Pac Liquors, at the St. Petersburg store, amid a traditional, large wine selection.

The little old wine shop is getting its first makeover in years, by chains and franchisees who want to look bright and shiny for novice drinkers eager to join the wine lifestyle. Four new chains around the Tampa Bay area have tossed out fashions long popular with traditional wine drinkers and intimidating to newcomers. In 20 new locations by the end of the year there will be no fussy cellars, crowded liquor aisles, vast supermarkets or box-cluttered warehouses.

Instead, Cork & Olive, WineStyles, Vino 100 and the Grape will populate malls or new strip centers in booming neighborhoods. Marketing from all four pictures their customers as young



Michael Probst of Tampa says his chain of Cork & Olive wine shops markets to novice wine drinkers who want simpler approaches to selecting a bottle.

and as vibrant as those in ads for the Gap or for Lifestyles fitness centers.

The New World wine shops make selection easier by limiting to under 200 the labels they stock, many of them unknown.

"Who needs 2,000 bottles of wine to pick something for dinner?" asks Cork & Olive's Michael Probst, a dapper German who came to Tampa to start his version of the Starbucks dream. So far, he has nine shops.

Reduced inventory leaves more room for roving salespeople, dawdling customers and sleek furniture. Probst designed his own packaging and modern shelving of polished wood and industrial piping. It had to be strong, contemporary and, he says, "elegant."

Traditional wine merchants, already challenged by supermarkets, discounters and the Internet, say their advantage remains personal service and the wine savvy to get better wine at lower prices.

Veterans like Lee Neal, who stocks 3,000 wines at Pic Pac Liquors in St. Petersburg, admits there's public fear and misunderstanding about wine, but says traditional shops get a bum rap as stuffy and expensive. Their staffs are helpful to newcomers and most of the wine is less than \$15 a bottle.

Yet the chains think there is a big thirst for a new look and sales pitch, especially in Florida. By the end of 2006, new chains will have 20 shops from Sarasota to Tampa.

Because the goal is to bring new consumers to the table, almost every chain store has a big one, wood or marble, in the center or front of the store, with open bottles and staff and customers gathered around it. Counter and cash register are discreetly hidden.

The Grape, a Georgia chain, has taken tasting further and installed an entire restaurant and wine bar in its stores. In downtown St. Petersburg, a wine bar called Tastings uses another concept, offering well-known wines that consumers can buy from stylish Italian coolers; the founders may eventually franchise.

Something missing from new-generation stores: signs for "Italy" or "merlot" or any other traditional name of grape, region or country, or labels of recognizable wineries. Instead the focus is on easy spectrums of body and flavor, labeled emotionally, as with "silky" and "bold," or marked on "flavor barometers." Neither consumers nor staff need fear mispronouncing foreign places or terms like *terroir*, or knowing Rhone from Rhine.

At Winestyles, Rhianna Brandt explains the concept of body in red wines with a classic analogy of milk: The "fruity" category has a weight more like skim, "mellow's" like 2 percent and "bold" is whole milk. But where to find zinfandel? "Most are in "bold," but we have a few in "mellow" and some in "fruity," she says.

Is that dumbing down wine, opening a market or teaching? Look around in "fruity," and you'll be able to learn that pinot noirs and barberas are similar.

The Grape calls it "grape edutainment." The chains all emphasize that the potential market is massive because more than 50 percent of adults in the United States do not drink wine. The Web sites and literature stress franchise opportunities as much as they do wine.

Beyond decor, the key change the new retailers make is the much smaller inventory. That makes the stores easier to navigate but reduces the number of brands. It also emphasizes the hand sell, but puts the stress on the customer's taste more than anything they've read or heard or any recommendation from the seller. Customers who seek a specific brand, say Ravenswood, will rarely find it.

Since Cork & Olive is still small, Florida-based and the stores company-owned, Probst can select all the wines himself. At others, headquarters sets a national list of 1,500 or 2,000 wines, from which a franchisee can choose.

But which wines? Each chain has a few small brands known to veteran wine shoppers. The rest are private labels sold only at the chain, or rarely seen second labels and from obscure wineries or cooperatives.

The chains sometimes present these as boutique, small-lot or artisan wines, but they are not those known to or sought by experienced wine drinkers. All wine merchants want to avoid the biggest brands that the grocery stores stock and to seek out smaller brands that can be almost exclusive.

Of an independent wine store's selection of thousands of wines, almost all are listed in newspapers, books, magazines, ratings and talked about on the Web.

With the small, odd selections in chains "there is no sorting point," says Michael Klauber, a Sarasota restaurateur and wine merchant. Buyers cannot compare on reputation or price.

And while new chains insist that quality is in the taste of the sipper, value for the dollar is not as evident. Most of the chains brag that their wines are under \$25, but that is true of any wine store. Consumers fear that good wine is expensive, but that's fed by the hideous markup in restaurants that makes a glass of the plainest wine \$7 and a bottle \$30 and up.

Actually, almost all wine - 80 percent according to the California Wine Institute - sells for \$14.99 or less. Anything over \$15 counts as ultra-premium; that \$15- to \$25-bracket is where most of the chain store products are.

There remains a huge variety of bargains and bad deals at many price points under \$25.

At any price, smart wine stores, be they chain or independent, are adopting formats that are shopper-friendly and appealing to the modern customers more savvy about malls than wine.

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THE NEW WORLD WINE SHOPS

CORK & OLIVE

Started: Oldsmar, 2004

Stores: Nine, 14 by end of 2006, all in Tampa Bay market; goal of 150 in Florida.

Slogan: "Trust your taste."

Look: Avocado, burgundy and lemon.

Wine list: 200 bottles arranged at random; scattered pamphlets and signs telling "wine stories" about grapes and regions.

Prices: \$7 to \$71; average price, \$12.

Tasting notes: Free tasting table pours house favorites; will open bottles to try before buying.

Corkers: Barrels of table wine, rotating selection of olive oils, glassware; private sales at home and corporate parties.

Web site: www.corkandolive.com

The Grape

Started: Vinings, Ga., outside Atlanta, 2000

Stores: Sarasota, opening in Tampa's International Plaza this fall; 15 nationwide.

Slogan: "Taste is all that counts."

Colors: Clubby scene, dark purple, bright green.

Wine list: 120 wines, arranged in 10 groups: four reds (light-, medium-, full-bodied and expensive) four whites (same), sweet and sparkling.

Price ranges: By the glass, \$6 to \$14; bottles start at \$18.

Tasting notes: Under "Try Before You Buy," shoppers can buy tastes of all bottles in store in varying sizes and "By the Bunch" flights in wine bar.

Corker: Wine bar and restaurant with contemporary small plates of olives, pates, crepes, sandwiches, salads and sweets for lunch, dinner, snacks and Sunday brunch.

Web site: www.yourgrape.com

VINO 100

Started: Peoria, Ill., 2003.

Stores: St. Petersburg, Bradenton; Brandon/Valrico store to open in fall, 38 stores nationwide and 30 in development.

Slogan: "Where the buying is as enjoyable as the drinking."

Colors: Wooden wine bins, open floors.

Wine list: 100 wines, arranged by "Wine Barometer," measuring each wine on two 14-degree scales, fruity to dry in flavor and light to full in body.

Prices: \$10 to \$25

Tasting notes: Two bottles opened daily, others opened on request; thematic tastings every two weeks.

Corker: Cigars and gifts.

Web site: www.vino100.com

WineStyles

Started: Fort Lauderdale, 2004.

Stores: Belleair Bluffs, opening this fall in Safety Harbor; more than 120 stores nationwide.

Slogan: "It's what's inside that counts . . . because every day is a special occasion."

Look: Open floors, faux-painted walls, arched alcoves.

Wine list: 160 wines, arranged by style: crisp smooth, rich or bubbly for whites; fruity, mellow, bold or nectar for reds.

Prices: \$10 to \$25, rare bottles up to \$200.

Tasting notes: Several wines opened daily; free tastings each evening; thematic tastings on Fridays.

Corker: Large open space to host private parties, instant chilling machine.

Web site: www.awineexperience.com

- CHRIS SHERMAN