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Tucson and wine pair well

Stories by Valerie Vinyard

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Like a fine cabernet sauvignon, Tucson's wine scene is maturing — even as many of the experts behind the bar are only in their 20s.

Bill Snyder, the 27-year-old dining room manager at Feast, loves the variety in the wine scene at Tucson restaurants and retailers. "It's remarkable for a city the size of Tucson to have both the number of importers and distributors, and places that serve wine," said Snyder, who recently passed his Level II sommelier certification.

On top of that, Snyder said, there is quality Arizona wine made at places not far from here, including Callaghan Vineyards and Dos Cabezas Winery and Vineyard.

Noel Patterson, assistant to master sommelier Laura Williamson, pours wine for a living at VinTabla.

On his own time, the 36-year-old also enjoys trying out wines with friends and is studying for his Level III sommelier certification.

"In the last five years, there has been a huge change in the wine industry in Tucson," said Patterson, who also has worked at Hacienda del Sol, The Dish Bistro and Wine Bar and Anthony's in the Catalinas.

"The wine scene was dead" in 2000-2003, said Patterson, who left Tucson for Orange County, Calif., in 2003 but returned two years later. "There were a few places but not much for normal people to go and get a normal glass of wine.

"There's actually a wine culture in Tucson now. If there wasn't, I wouldn't have gotten back in the wine business."

Another sign is the relative abundance of sommeliers at Tucson's nicer wine stores and restaurants.

Just a decade ago, only a smattering of restaurants in cities such as New York and Los Angeles had them on staff to talk about wine and and guide diners.

Williamson, who co-owns VinTabla and is one of only 17 women master sommeliers in the world, attributes part of the excitement surrounding wine to a larger shift in how Americans view dining out.

"It's not necessarily fine dining, it's for entertainment," said Williamson, 38, whose Foothills-area restaurant offers Friday night tastings and a half-price bar menu in a convivial setting.

The buzz has led to more 20-somethings entering the wine scene — on both sides of the pour. "Young kids become intrigued with wine because they see it as a way to increase their income through tips. It's really more of a self-centered position at first," she said.

Also:

- A master som in a male field
- Meet some local sommeliers
- Cool wine events

Weekly 1-cent or free wine tastings in Tucson

- **BevMo!**, 6228 E. Broadway, 514-0695; 4646 N. Oracle Road, opening Thursday.

What: Sample four to eight wines.

When: Noon-4 p.m. Saturdays.

- **Plaza Liquors**, 2642 N. Campbell Ave., 327-0452.

What: Sample four to five wines.

When: 1-4 p.m. Saturdays.

- **The RumRunner Wine and Cheese Co.**, 3131 E. First St., 326-0121.

What: Sample six to 10 wines, either by region or winemaker.

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- **Total Wine and More**, 4370 N. Oracle Road, 887-0174.

What: Sample 12-15 wines, either by region or winemaker.

When: Noon-6 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and noon-5 p.m. Sundays.

Tasting tips at restaurants

Jay Fernandez, beverage manager at Wildflower Grill in Tucson, gave these pointers:

But she's watched it lead to more folks in their 20s embracing wine. Williamson, who is on the Court of Master Sommeliers and teaches wine classes, has seen a 35 percent increase "of kids under 30" taking certification exams within the last five years.

The Tucson Culinary Festival, which starts tonight, will showcase some of those sommeliers, as well as dozens of wineries and the 37 Tucson Originals restaurants over four events through Sunday. The largest, the Grand Tasting at Loews Ventana Canyon Resort on Saturday, drew about 900 people last year.

"People are very open to trying things," said Pat Connors, owner of Pastiche Modern Eatery. He maintains a weekly list of about 25 wines in his restaurant that are retail priced.

"Wine is becoming a staple instead of a luxury," said Connors, who opened his retail wine store 3 1/2 years ago and holds Friday evening tastings. He noticed consumer demand for wines increasing in 2002 and opened his shop in early 2005.

"I've noticed that the consumer is becoming a lot more adventurous," said Kate Tullar, who is 23 and a sommelier at the Ventana Room, Tucson's five-diamond restaurant.

"A lot of people are choosing to go with wine pairings, instead of spending \$300 on a bottle," said Tullar, who is often the first person to approach the guests' table and offer the 55-page wine list. A Level II sommelier, she enjoys pairing wines with her guests' food.

The Tucson native, a former bar manager at 58 Degrees and Holding Co., started working at the Ventana Room in February. "I've seen over the last three to four years that the wine bar scene has just kind of exploded," Tullar said.

Jay Fernandez is the 30-year-old beverage manager at Wildflower Grill who teaches wine to its servers.

"(The wine scene) is definitely flourishing right now," Fernandez said. "People are more interested in wine than they have been in the past."

He said that pop culture and movies such as "Sideways" have piqued the market's interest.

With interest comes learning. "People are asking for more specific wines now," Fernandez said. "They know where the Russian River Valley is."

Bari Boyd opened Vino 100, a wine shop and bar, in Oro Valley in March 2006.

"I went into this without a lot of knowledge — I can't get enough of it now," said Boyd, 50, who plans to take the Level I sommelier test next year. "There's always something to learn every day."

Since Boyd opened Vino 100, she's noticed more people really wanting to learn and experiment with wine.

"People aren't staying in their comfort zone," she said. "It's fun."

Boyd takes fun to a new level. Her shop offers karaoke every other Saturday from 8 p.m. to midnight. (The next karaoke night will be Nov. 1.) And starting Nov. 8, her customers will be able to enjoy a glass of wine and a 15-minute chair massage for \$25 on Saturday afternoons — by appointment. Vino 100 also sells hors d'oeuvres such

1. When the server presents the bottle, check the label and confirm it's the wine you ordered.

Receiving the wrong bottle "happens more than you'd expect," Fernandez said.

2. Once the server has uncorked the bottle and poured a taste, swirl the liquid and give the wine a "nose." About 2 percent of bottles are flawed, he said.

Flaws can include TCA, or 2,4,6-trichloroanisole, a chemical created from bacteria. "It kind of smells like wet dog or wet cardboard," Fernandez said.

3. Inspect — don't smell — the cork. It can give you clues.

"I've seen someone put the cork in their mouth," Fernandez said. "You're at (the diner's) mercy. You don't want to make them feel silly for what they're doing."

If too much air gets inside the bottle, oxidation can be another possibility.

"If you see striations of wine going all the way up through the cork, it's possibly oxidized," Fernandez said.

4. Take a sip. You can leave the wine on your palate for a few seconds, but you'll experience all the flavors after you swallow.

Notice how long the wine stays on your palate after you've swallowed. That is known as the "finish." Generally, the nicer the wine, the longer the finish.

Tucson retailers getting competition from big-box stores

As big-box retailers such as Bevmo! and Total Wine and More open in Tucson, local stores are hoping there are enough wine buyers here to go around.

Yvonne Foucher opened Catavinos in September 2007. All of the bottles of wine in the shop are priced at \$15 or less.

as chicken wings and cheeses, as well as a rotating list of about 10 wines by the glass and eight beers.

More quality at modest prices

Jeff Fuld, owner of Elle Wine Country Restaurant, has run wine programs at restaurants since 1995. He remembers when pinot grigio was an adventurous choice.

Fuld likes that there are more quality wines available at modest prices, which is less than \$15 retail, compared to a decade ago, especially from South America countries like Spain and Portugal.

For people who are new to wine, Fuld suggests going to local restaurants or wine shops and telling them things you've liked and things you haven't.

"Wine is liquid food. There's so much snobbery and pretense with it, but we can't take ourselves too seriously," Fuld said.

"You don't need pomp and circumstance to enjoy wine."

Still, Andrew Record, the 23-year-old assistant retail manager for 58 Degrees and Holding Co., noted that wine drinkers can be a fickle bunch.

"I think the interesting thing is the cycles people buy in," Record said. "One week, some region will be really hot, and the next it will drop completely off the map."

One of those examples is merlot, to Record's dismay.

"Here's a wine that has a capacity to be just breathtaking, but the average American drinker has stopped drinking merlot," he said. "Part of it is that merlot is seen as an introductory wine."

Still, Brandy Ciaccio, 26, a UA grad student who is also the "staff sommelier" at Plaza Liquors, said Tucsonans seem up for ways to try something different.

"People are pretty open to wine. I like that," she said.

"I'm surprised at the different bars that have good wines. Like at Che's Lounge. They were pouring a Portugese wine that we sell here."

Patterson of VinTabla said Feast, The Dish and VinTabla have eclectic wine lists at reasonable prices.

"I like very much the idea that you can drink wine where they're not charging huge restaurant markups," he said.

"I think the most surprising trend in Tucson's wine scene is the new attitude toward white wine," Williamson said. "White wines are now embraced much more openly and guests are comfortable trying exotic varieties — they feel safe straying from the chardonnay and sauvignon blanc camps.

"Hooray for this trend, as white wines are every bit as serious as reds and even more so in some cases, such as Assyrtico from Santorini and Gruner Veltliner from Austria.

"Next push on the radar is for sparkling wines."

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"I'm maintaining, but the big boxes are hurting all of us," said Foucher.

"One of the things I've noticed is that there are a lot more wines available in this price range. A lot of people say their emotional threshold for wine is \$15."

Kate Tullar of the Ventana Room echoed Foucher.

"I really do hope that we can stay with our local shops," Tullar said. "You're not going to find a lot of anything new (at the big boxes)."

Bari Boyd of Vino 100 said she realizes that competition is inevitable, but believes that local shops offer more than just bottles for sale.

"When any new business opens up that's wine-related, it always takes away business in the beginning," she said. "But to me, if people want to shop in an impersonal big warehouse-type store, then they're not really looking for personal service."

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