

Novice oenophiles can learn all they need to know about wine while staying local

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With more than 2,500 wineries in California, sampling vintages from them all is not very likely for the average wine drinker. But with so many wonderful wines being produced in the Golden State, there's no excuse for not trying to get to know more of them.

To this end, a plethora of local restaurants and wine shops are bringing area winemakers and their pours out of the wine country and into town to meet, greet and drink with wine lovers.

Viva Los Gatos restaurant has held a "meet the winemaker" night for the past five years, and manager Mike Binschus says it is one of their most popular nights.

"We are pretty much as busy as a Saturday night," he says. "These events really bring in a lot of people."

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winemaker events at Viva started as a way to introduce customers to wines on the restaurant's list

that they might not have heard of or tasted before, says Bill Linder, Viva's director of wine events. Since the events began, Linder says, the response has been tremendously positive. In fact, he says Viva has made changes to its wine list based on input from the wine nights.

"Our goal was to create something entertaining and educational and sell some wine," he says, "and we wanted to do it in a convivial atmosphere with a lot of fun involved."

More than that, Linder says, Viva provides an environment for people to become familiar with wine that is more intimate and less intimidating than visiting an actual winery. Each Tuesday evening, diners are able to order tastes from the featured winery as Linder and the winemaker make the rounds of the dining room, discussing the wines and answering questions at each table. Depending on the crowd, the winemakers will either provide an in-depth discussion about their wines or just answer basic questions.

"It's kind of like going into a winery, but in a much more focused environment," Linder says. "At a winery, the focus on you can be gone if someone else comes up [to the tasting bar], but here, the winemaker or myself will stay at the table until the people haven't got any more questions."

In August, California Cafe started its own wine tasting program, which has also proven extremely popular.

Like Viva, California Cafe's wine tasting began as a way to introduce its customers to wines they might not be familiar with. But instead of focusing on the wines on its list, general manager Darrell Bennett says, the restaurant likes to bring in local wines it doesn't carry.

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"We were trying to think of an idea to market local wineries, and we thought this would be a great way to do that," Bennett says. "A lot of these smaller Santa Cruz Mountain

wineries don't have tasting rooms, so we wanted to try and create a tasting room for them here. It's a great opportunity to promote the town, wine and what we're about."

Each Tuesday night from 5 to 7 p.m., a local winemaker will talk about and pour four tastes of wine on the patio at California Cafe, while hors d'oeuvres, specially paired to each wine by chef Taylor Boudreaux, are passed around.

Bennett says this is a fun way for people to become familiar with some of the wines in their own back yard.

"People love to get to know new wineries; it's an adventure," he says. "We average about 50 to 60 people each Tuesday, and we even have one group of about 20 people that come every week."

Dave Moulton, owner and winemaker at Burrell School Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains, has been a featured winemaker at both the Viva and California Cafe wine tasting events and says he averages about one offsite wine tasting a month. Although Burrell School has a tasting room, Moulton says these events are a great way to reach out to new people.

"It's a good chance to give them an opportunity to ask questions in a low-pressure environment," he adds. "I find that at a lot of these events, people end up learning more about themselves and what they like or don't like in wines, and in the process, they learn more about my wines."

Local wine shops and cafes are also starting to see

the advantage of bringing winemakers in to talk about their wines.

At Los Gatos Gourmet, a downtown wine and specialty food shop that carries about 160 different wine labels, co-owner Faun Skyles says they host a "meet the winemaker" night twice a month.

"There are not a lot of venues that Santa Cruz Mountain winemakers can showcase their wines at," Skyles says, "and anytime you can taste, it's a good thing."

Tastings at Los Gatos Gourmet don't stop with winemaker nights. The store offers tastings every day of wines from its racks.

"Each day we look at the weather and decide on six to eight wines to taste that day. On a hot day, we might choose something like a rose," Skyles says, "and on Friday nights we do a special tasting with hard-to-find wines so that our customers can taste wines they would normally not be able to."

At Uncorked in Saratoga, a flight of three wines is offered daily, and a five-wine "super flight" is offered on the weekends. Co-owners Patrick Rupert and Greg Brown also try to host two to three events a month with specific winemakers or a featured type of wine.

"It's an intimate way to get to know the wines; there always seems to be a story behind each of them. It also makes people more comfortable when they get to know the winemaker," Rupert says. "For some of these wineries, it's harder and harder to get good exposure, so when people can get out and do tastings, it's a good thing."

Rupert says the best way for his customers to expand their wine education is to increase their exposure to all types of wines. So in addition to

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bringing in local winemakers, Uncorked has also added some variety to its wine tasting events.

Sometimes the events will focus on a specific country, rather than a specific winery, Rupert says, or they will bring in three winemakers at once and let each pour a different varietal. But one of his favorites has been the "women in winemaking" event, which featured wines crafted by several female winemakers.

Some local wineries do have tasting rooms for those who want a wine country experience closer to home.

Fleming Jenkins, which started selling its wines two years ago, will reopen its tasting room on May 1 in downtown Los Gatos. Its tasting room, Backyard Wineries, used to also pour selections from Clos La Chance.

"We are a new winery - we just started making wine in 2003 - and we don't have an established name yet. So this is a great opportunity to get people familiar with our wines," assistant winemaker Ryan Herb says. "We're trying to emulate the wine country experience, but in a smaller downtown setting, and . . . when you come here you will be talking directly to the people involved with the winery, so that's a plus."

Cinnabar Vineyards and Winery opened a tasting room in Saratoga Village last June and has averaged about 100 people a day. Tasting room manager Ken Om' Iniaobhs says half the people who visit are discovering Cinnabar for the first time.

"We try to make our tastings interactive and easy for people, even those who don't know much about wine," he says. "We give them tasting notes, and that generates discussions. Then we use that opportunity to educate them on how certain flavors

and tastes came about. It's definitely an educational experience."

Some people are continuing their wine education with classes such as those offered at the French Cellar in Los Gatos. Roughly 20 classes are offered every year, with a focus on French wines that includes everything from the basic "red wines of France" to "deluxe white burgundies" and "chocolats noirs and the red wines of Bordeaux."

Jay Druian, co-owner of the French Cellar, says the classes are extremely popular and often sell out fast. For a fee of \$60, eight wines or champagnes are tasted and discussed, including a basic overview of each wine and what types of foods would pair best with them.

When it comes to wine, the consensus seems to be that you can never know it all, and tasting as much as you can is the best way to expand your knowledge.

"No matter what level you are in your wine education, there is always more to learn - and that goes across the board for everyone," Rupert says. "Just continue to taste."

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