

THE FINE ART OF WINE

Local aficionados talk about their love of wine, and say it is more approachable than you think

BY SAMANTHA TRIST
Special to The Post and Courier

Wine is like your good friend who is in the city to talk to the opposite sex.

For those who are friends with wine, they know how great it is. Many times, though, people don't get to know it because they think it's stodgy, stuffy, snobby or at their first encounter it was wasted. Luckily for wine, it has some good friends throughout Charleston who are popping in and out. They're letting everyone know it's more than just fancy labels — there are some really fun labels that can get along with just about anyone.

Brad Bell, proprietor of downtown Charleston's Social Wine Bar, isn't shy about wine. He loves the challenge of getting to know it.

"When I study wine, I am studying much more than just wine. The studying the world as we know it," Bell said. "It's culture, history, business, philosophy, science, politics, religion, etc. It seems to touch almost all aspects of Western society. Plus, it is challenging. I love to blind taste."

And for others, "There is a certain romance to it," said Daniel David Grayson of Avondale Wine and Cheese in West Ashley.

"There's nothing like champagne on New Year's Eve or at a wedding or to celebrate something," she continued. "A meal just doesn't seem as charming and complete without wine."

Daniel David's Laura Alberts Tasteful Options offers fine wine and gourmet food. For co-owner Sami Day, the art of wine is in the craftsmanship.

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handcrafted from vine to bottle. That it is handcrafted, it's a fruit that's grown, and it's handcrafted. It's aspirational. It's exciting. And I love food, and it complements food so well."

Everyone can see a good, complementary food. Whether it's served with cheese, with a salad or enjoyed by itself, wine enhances many occasions.

"It's not something you think by yourself. It brings people together. It pulls people to gather as matter what you're having," said Doreen Grayson. "You share a bottle with people. It's something to talk about. It's kind of the lubricator."

Bell once said people's taste in food as a way to find wines they will like.

"Wine people have had at least some experience with wine, and you try to base it off something they have enjoyed before. Otherwise, just find out what kind of food they enjoy," he said. "Hotland is, ketchup or blue cheese or ranch, for example."

In addition to having a personal love for wine and enjoying it socially, Bell, Doreen Grayson, Day and others throughout Charleston offer regular wine tastings. They are social events that bring people together to try new flavors.

Selected wines are from all over the world, including our own backyard. Irvin House Vineyards on Wadswater Island is the area's only winery that produces selections

from vine to bottle. Whether it's local or imported, wine is so just most people to know that wine is for everyone. They see too many people put attention only to labels or specific regions.

"I'd like to hold this one guy making delicious grapes in the state of North Carolina," Day said. "North Carolina isn't very famous in wine. France is sexy, Argentina is sexy."

"Wine can be fun," she continued. "We have wine makes come in all of the time. They're regular people. They're not wine snobs. They're regular people that are passionate about food, creating a product."

And perfectly regular people also are to enjoy wine, too.

Doreen Grayson said she doesn't like it that many try to make wine an exotic culture. Anyone is capable of enjoying wine.

"There's been a huge movement in the last five years for the wine industry to become more academic and more scientific, but that's not important for a consumer," she said. "You don't need to know all that just to enjoy a bottle of wine. A consumer can do that on their own with just a little experimenting."

"You don't have to be an expert to follow your own tastes and to make a decision about what you want to drink. Ultimately, it's the enjoyment of the wine that matters."

In fact, according to Bell, it's more about a person's passion for it.

"The more you know about wine, the less you know," he said. "The complexity of an occasion, and with every vintage, there is just that much more to learn. I completely see how you do it. I hope I never lose my passion for it."

Wine and most people are one's passion are about wine, too, because of its availability. Good wine can be found at any price. And similar to the glasses per bottle, it can be a sensible choice, especially in today's times.

"For wine, across the board, you can still appreciate a lesser vintage," said Daniel Grayson. "You shouldn't pay attention to vintage anyway. Grapes are grapes. They don't know there is a price on their grapes. They react to the weather like every other grape."

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Once price isn't an issue anymore, many just have to realize how easy it is to get to know wine. While Bell says he loves to "greek out" with other "winos," he pointed out that "obviously, the fun is at the very essence of why people drink wine."

"Wine should be approachable. You don't need to have a trained palate. We're all trained already, we all eat," said Doreen Grayson.

"There should not be this huge gap between people in the business and the consumer. The consumer is perfectly capable. This doesn't

happen in the beer industry, and it's not like this in the cheese industry. There's no school to learn about cheese. I just ate a lot," she continued.

"The most important thing is to taste wine and decide what you like, understand what you like and then serve it out. Eventually, you'll have a catalog in your mind of what you like and when it's from. You learn from enjoying. It's not important to study it. No one studies soda, but you know the difference between a Coke and a Diet Coke or a Pepsi. No one went to school for that."

Day of Laura Alberts also thinks people need to just pour a glass and enjoy wine. It's not for being studied. It's for drinking.

"There is no right or wrong wine. Whatever you like is the right wine," she said. "If you like sweet wines, then that's what you should drink. If you prefer dry, earthy wines, then that's what you should drink. There's no right or wrong."

"People need to learn to trust their palate. And as you drink, your palate becomes more discerning. The biggest message for people is I would like people to just trust their palate and drink what you like."



WINE TASTINGS

Avondale Wine & Cheese
803 Savannah Highway, West Ashley
766-5444
avondalewine.com
Tastings: Monday and Thursday 5-7 p.m.
\$5.50 wine and some cheese

Laura Alberts Tasteful Options
899 Island Park Drive, Daniel Island
855-4711
www.lauralberts.com
Tastings: Fourth Thursday of every month 7-8:30 p.m.
\$25/person or free for Geopie Enthusiasts club members
4-6 wines featured and includes specialized and off-menu appetizers

Social Wine Bar & Restaurant
188 East Bay St., downtown
523-5685
www.socialwinebar.com
Several large tastings a year with more than 12 wines
Also provide private tastings to hotels
Daily: More than 62 wines on tap to try by the glass

Irvin House Vineyards
8721 Bees Buzz Road, West Ashley Island
203-6867
www.charlestonwine.com
Tastings: Thursday-Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m., tastings start every half hour
\$2.50 includes all five wines and a winegob glass
free from every Saturday at 2 p.m.
Private rooms for parties of 15 and up available

Wine Avails
1039 S.C. Highway 41, Mount Pleasant
855-2555
www.wineavails.com
Wine-down Fridays 5-7 p.m.
Get a 118 wine card for \$5

Muse Restaurant and Wine Bar
52 Society St., downtown
373-1182
www.charlestonmuse.com
More than 100 wines by the glass
Check in for wine classes

Cavali and Reserve
51 George St., downtown
Get downtown
373-7797
www.wineandbananas.com
Tastings: Thursdays 5:30-7:30 p.m.
118 includes light hors d'oeuvres

The Wine Shop
1 Lockwood Drive, downtown
277-3881
www.charlestonshopofwine.com
Tastings: Every Friday 5-7 p.m.
\$7 includes 4 wines

Crashed Fine Wine
716 S. Shilohville Blvd., Mount Pleasant
814-1556
www.crashedfinewine.com