

SUNDAY, JULY 29, 2007

Lost in the Vineyards? Wine Help is Out There

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Liz Leonard of Norfolk enjoys a glass of wine, but declines to get uptight about labels and vintages. "I know about as much or maybe a little more about wine than the average wine drinker," she said.

Leonard recently won the "Wine for Life" promotion at Zebra's Bistro in Medfield, a restaurant and wine bar with dozens of bottles lining the walls. It allows her to stop in for a free glass every day, a wine connoisseur's dream.

"I don't exactly know the difference between a Syrah and a Shiraz, but I feel pretty comfortable ordering wine," she said. "So many people enjoy wine but don't want to sound foolish. Unless you're extremely educated in wine terms, it's easy to say the wrong thing."

Not everyone shares Leonard's relaxed attitude towards the lexicon of wine; the appellations, ratings, and myriad of labels faced when deciding which wine to drink. Local experts say the pleasure of wine drinking has been replaced by anxiety. Average or infrequent drinkers are paralyzed by the options before them.

"I've had clients call from bathrooms of Manhattan restaurants, frantic about

which wine to choose for an important business lunch," said **Chris Minervino**, co-owner of Newton's Lower Falls Wine Company. For years, Minervino has tried to put customers at ease in his store by encouraging them to ignore ratings set by Wine Spectator magazine and the like and by dressing casually himself. Still, he said, customers who worry about making the right impression on business associates or in-laws will sometimes fax wine lists and menus to him from restaurants, looking for help in choosing the right bottle.

Minervino is one of several wine aficionados creating products and tools to help make wine-buying decisions easier for their customers. He has partnered with **Tod Dimmick**, a Dover cookbook and wine newsletter author, to write a forthcoming book that will be something of a portable wine coach. And Medfield Wine Shoppe owner Matthew Carroll has partnered with two customers who are high-tech entrepreneurs to develop a database that customers use to track purchases and remember favorite wines. Leonard said both tools could be useful, although she has worked out her own unique way to learn about wine.

"I have these liquor store guys who know me quite well," she said. "Occasionally I'll ask for a label from a bottle of wine in a restaurant and bring it to their store to see if they can get it for me."

Minervino's and Dimmick's book concept, developed with the help of an agent, is aimed at teaching wine drinkers to focus on the types, or varietals, of wine they like rather than trying to find particular labels. If a customer knows which flavor grapes

he likes, such as pinot noir, he can order comparable wines anywhere, they say.

The book also aims to educate readers about the wine industry with nuggets of information about the importance of proper wine temperature, the lack of which can ruin the flavor of an expensive bottle purchased for dinner in a restaurant.

Other chapters will explain how wine is distributed and sold and how people can learn to rely less on ratings systems when buying it.

"The romance of the experience lends itself poorly to numbers on a checklist and wonderfully to the hunt," Dimmick said.

At Carroll's wine store on Route 109 in Medfield, customers are encouraged to create their own wine ratings.

Customers Chris Poulin and Rick Lane, founders of Walpole-based tech consulting company AxiomRTI, hatched the idea for their wine-tasting database during wine tasting events in the store.

Called Enofile, the database tracks the purchases customers make at the store. It's also available on members' home computers, allowing customers to write comments and review their choices, and see what's available at the store.

The database authors are currently in the process of making it available to stores in other areas, including ones in Acton and West Bridgewater.

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