

# Armchair winemaking

Make wine away from home with a B.C.'s UVins

STORY BY **MARI KANE**  
PHOTOS BY **RALPH RINKE**

Now I know how a fat cork fits into a skinny bottle-neck.

I never had seen the corking process so closely as when I bottled my own wine at a winemaking store in Vancouver, British Columbia. As I wrangled with the Portuguese Floor Corker, the proprietor offered guidance:

"Pop the cork in either end, stand in front of the corker, and push down gently," directed Murray Miller of Back Alley Wineworks. "Pulling the handle up opens the jaws all the way and releases the plate."

After a few tries, I made the corker work for me, and I felt flush with the satisfaction of producing my very own wine.

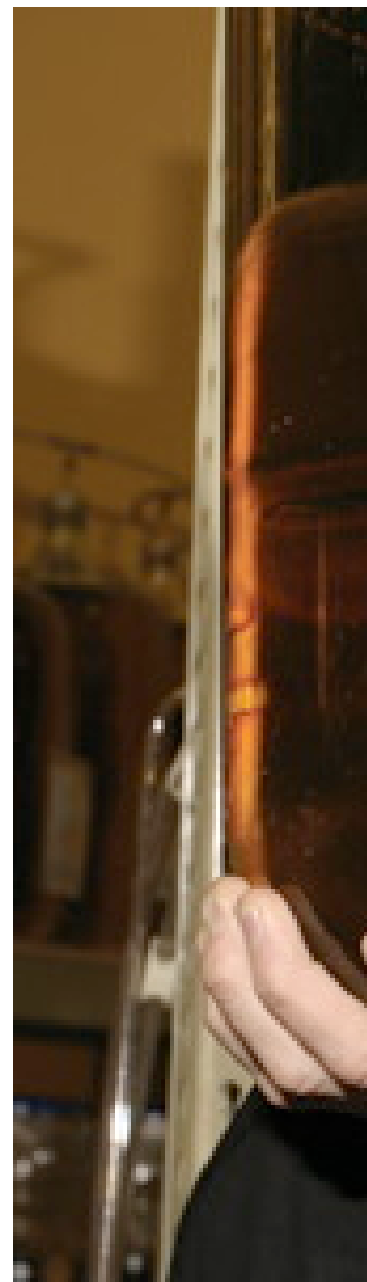
Well, sort of.

My contribution entailed paying \$160 CDN to Miller and tossing a packet of yeast into a carboy full of juice. Six weeks later, I was filling 30 bottles of fresh Amarone, made from a grape juice kit. Miller did all the rest.

The wine was ready to drink immediately and worked out to \$5.35 CDN per bottle, an insanely low price in a province where it can be difficult to find anything drinkable for under \$12 CDN.

As a new resident in a country where alcohol taxes are prohibitive, I wondered, "How can this kind of armchair winemaking be lawful?"

With gravitational gentleness, fresh Pinot Grigio streams into sanitized bottles. Behind them, carboys of fermenting red and white wines are topped with one of Murray Miller's inventions: plastic jugs used as overflow protectors.



## IT'S LEGAL, EH?

"What we're doing is nothing more than the product of a fluke," said Miller, who has operated his Vancouver store with wife, Wendy Moore, for 10 years.

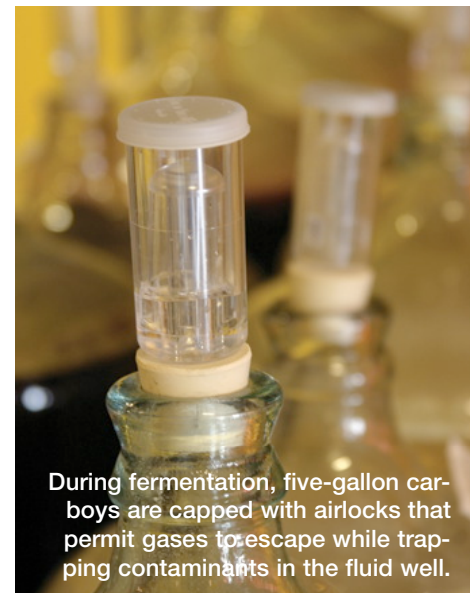
"Canadians can make beer or wine at home for their own consumption, but in B.C. and Ontario, the provincial governments neglected to state the address or location where home brewers can make beer or wine. So, that loophole was identified."

Canadian law states that in all provinces people may brew their own beer or wine "for personal consumption." However, in every province other than Ontario and British Columbia the law defines the location as "in your own home."

"I don't think that is a loophole," said Jim Mullen, past president of the Hobby Brewers and Vintners Association, and owner of Caribou Brewmasters in Prince George. "If anything it was an incomplete sen-



Murray Miller's thousand-watt smile shines through with the clarity of his white wine.



During fermentation, five-gallon carboys are capped with airlocks that permit gases to escape while trapping contaminants in the fluid well.



Coral Kennett of Vancouver, B.C., fills 30 bottles with her Pinot Grigio.

tence. Nobody had the foresight as to what the ramifications would be.”

Although UVins started via this legal omission, they must be licensed.

“Twenty years ago, some entrepreneurs came up with the UVin/UBrew process and nothing in legislation prohibited that,” said Barry Bieller, director of Policy, Planning and Communications for the Provincial Liquor Control and Licensing branch in Victoria. “A 1998-99 review of

provincial liquor policy came up with a recommendation to license the UBrews and UVins. We developed a licensing scheme for the industry and beginning in April 2000, all operators had to be licensed. So we’re six years into it now.”

Exclusion of the clause “in your own home” spawned a new wine-making industry in B.C. However, clauses such as “for personal consumption” make it difficult for UVintners to promote their product.

At the annual HBVA conference in Richmond, B.C., the 200 members were prohibited from drinking their own juice because it would constitute “public consumption.” Instead, they drink commercial wine.

Technically, HBVA members are not considered winemakers in the same fashion as commercial winery workers because members never own the wine. Legally, the customer owns it once fermentation starts.

“We are Licensed Contract

Bailees,” explained HBVA President Peter Dicken, who owns Valley Vines to Wines in Mill Bay. “As such, the law allows us to process wine on our premise and offer secondary assistance to the winemaking process.

“The difference between home-made and store-bought wine is that we are not paying the wine manufacturing tax because we are not the manufacturer,” Dicken added. “The customer is.”

Regardless of how the industry is framed, the numbers speak for themselves.

According to the HBVA, British Columbia boasts approximately 320 UVin stores, 90 percent of which are family owned and operated. The average annual sales revenue for a store is \$250,000. Total retail sales in the province top \$80 million per year.

UVins are not limited to Canada. In Grapevine, Texas, Su Vino Winery uses the same Wnexpert kits to make wine for private and public consumption at \$300 per batch. Unlike their Canadian counterparts, Su Vino offers a tasting room.

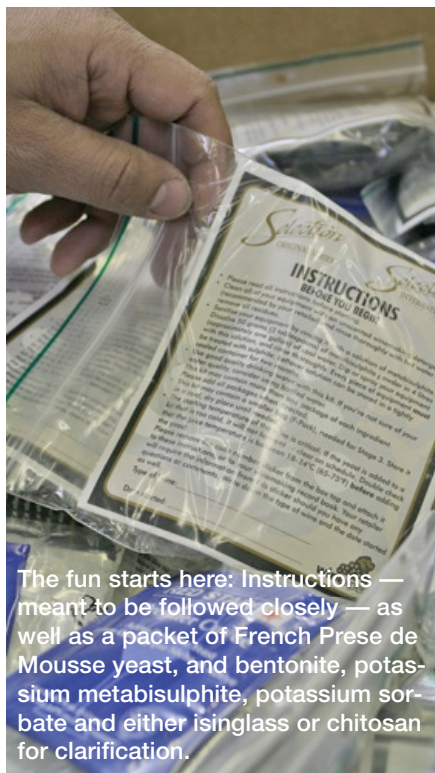
This is *not* your grandpa’s wine-making hobby.

**KIT AND CABOODLE**

The B.C. wine market has changed dramatically in the past decade, much of it driven by demand from an increasingly wine-savvy public.

“Ten years ago, customers were flocking to the stores because there was cheap wine,” Mullen said. “Now, price is not nearly so important as quality. Customers have become more educated about wine in B.C., and they see our industry as an alternative to high-end wines.”

Anyone who has drunk a \$10 bottle from giants such as Gallo, Mondavi or Peller Estates probably has consumed concentrated juice wine. It is the same concentration process used by kit makers that allows the Gallos of the world to



The fun starts here: Instructions — meant to be followed closely — as well as a packet of French Prese de Mousse yeast, and bentonite, potassium metabisulphite, potassium sorbate and either isinglass or chitosan for clarification.



Concentrated wine grape juice, packed in sterile plastic bags, retains grape matter that provides nutrients to the fermenting wine.

produce millions of cases of wine throughout the year.

“We didn’t invent juice concentrate or flash pasteurization,” said Tim Vandergrift of Wnexpert in Port Coquitlam, B.C., the largest producer of wine kits and a subsidiary of Andrés Wines. “All of our techniques and protocols come from the commercial wine industry. We consider ourselves to be simply another channel of distribution for wine products. One out of five bottles sold in Canada are made from a kit.”

Thanks to economies of scale, companies such as Andrés compete with commercial wineries to obtain top-level fruit from the best vineyards around the world.

“We have long-term vineyard contracts, and we buy from brokers and at auction, — just as wineries do — from growers in Europe, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and South Africa,” Vandergrift said. “Wherever they grow grapes, we’re out sourcing.”

**HEAVY LIFTING**

For the would-be winemaker, launching a UVin store is the next best thing to opening a commercial winery.

An operator can express the same dedication to wine by producing it 30 bottles at a time. However, making batches of five gallons, as opposed to thousands of cases, is extremely labor intensive for someone as obsessive to detail as Miller.

“I do a lot of lifting of 50- and 60-pound carboys, so I’m trying to imagine efficiency where efficiency isn’t,” Miller said. “My methodology tracks three vessels, so each time I move to the second vessel, I have to transfer it, and the resulting new vessel has to be put somewhere.”

Perpetually thinking outside the manufactured box, Miller has devised several proprietary techniques to increase efficiency and improve quality. One method requires discretion.

“I’m the only person to use vacuum off-gassing post-filtration, but I am cautious with it,” he said. “Too



Fresh boxes of an Australian blend roll off the assembly line in the Winexpert factory in Port Coquitlam, B.C.

## FAST FACTS

### UVIN DOS

- Have customer throw yeast into juice
- Let multiple customers share batches
- Have customer obliterate commercial labels before bottling
- Dump wine returned by customer for exchange

### & DON'TS

- Pour tastes of wine in store
- Consume wine at public events
- Organize bottle trades among customers
- Top up carboys with wine; have customer do it
- Store finished wine after bottling

### GRAPE STORY

Juice that goes into kits produced by Winexpert and its Ontario-based sister company Vineco is processed right in the vineyard.

Under the coldest conditions, the

shelf, the juice comes from the Valpolicella region in Italy where a portion of the grapes are sun-dried on straw mats and become sugary raisins. Alcohol roars up to 15 percent and residual sugar hovers at 0.5 percent. It's perfect for the holidays.

When we bottled the Amarone in December, it tasted like black cherry Kool-Aid, the fresh fruit so in your face you wanted to slap it. After a month, its youthful exuberance had transformed into teen angst. At four months, the still-dominant fruit tastes mature enough to get a home loan. I'm told that our final two bottles will be AARP eligible a year from now.

Stephanie Chale and Lisa McKay of Wineworks in Kimberley and Cranbrook, B.C., offer a 100 percent satisfaction guarantee.

"If we make something you don't like, we'll take it back and make you something else," they said. "There doesn't have to be anything

grapes are pressed, clarified and shipped as either concentrated or fresh juice to the winery in Ontario or B.C. There, the juices are blended and balanced near the freezing point, flash-pasteurized to kill microorganisms and packaged in sterile plastic bags. Then, the juice is boxed with yeast for fermentation, bentonite for clarification and a packet of crushed oak chips to add complexity. Just add water.

### LEGALESE

According to the B.C. Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, "UBrew/UVin is a licensed business that provides its customers with the ingredients, equipment and advice they need to make their own beer, wine, cider or coolers for their own private consumption, away from the UBrew/UVin premises. The customer must visit the store at least twice, first to mix the ingredients, add the yeast and pay for the wine kit, and then, after fermentation, to bottle it and take it away."

much vacuum could implode the carboy and strip off aromatics. It does ensure that any residual CO<sub>2</sub> from fermentation is removed, and it also reduces oxygen. I experimented for six months before implementing the technique, and I've done it without a single adverse incident. But, I don't recommend it to anyone else."

It's good to be the boss when you're a mad scientist.

### MATTERS OF TASTE

When it comes to ordering UVin wine, the law doesn't make it easy.

Tasting is prohibited in the store because all wine is the property of the customers. By drawing tastes from the carboys, the operator literally becomes a wine thief.

So, when I ordered my wine, rather than picking something from a catalog, I asked Miller for his recommendation in a full-bodied red. He suggested the Ken Ridge Showcase Amarone for its richness and soft acidity.

Like the \$40 Amarone on a store

technically wrong."

Miller predicts a bright future for this kind of wine business. His belief in the technology is so strong that he's planning to expand his operations in Vancouver and open a commercial winery in Alberta. He also has patents in process.

According to several HBVA members, Miller would be the first UVintner to move to the commercial side. However, he plans to keep using juice kits rather than fresh juice.

"Winemaking in this way is cheating, so it's up to us to do our best to turn out a great product," he said with a grin. "It's like a gift that arrives in a box."

**MARI KANE** moved to Vancouver, B.C., in 2005 and is writing a memoir about her life in the Sonoma County wine industry.

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