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The budget-minded wine tour

Nov 01 2007

By Mari Kane

If you think Vancouver is waterlogged, consider its wine-soddenness. This town is such a flowing river of wine it should really be called Vincouver. In addition to the bounty of imported bottles to be found, British Columbia is bloated with local juice: according to the BC Wine Institute (BCWI), 136 provincial wineries produced over 12 million litres in 2006. Hardly any of it left the province. Call it wine retention.



PHOTO: DOUG SHANKS

"Mmmm... tastes grapey!" **Vino enthusiasts gather for one of the weekly tasting events at Yaletown's Taylorwood Wines.**

BCWI also says that, on a per-capita basis, British Columbians buy more wine — 13.9 litres per person — than any other Canadians, except those in the Yukon. (And with ongoing climate change, it's possible the Yukon will someday be the new wine country.)

On the downside, B.C. also leads the nation in liquor prices, with bottles in Vancouver costing around 50 per cent more than in Halifax, and two to three times as much as in the U.S.

So, what's a budget-minded lush got to do to learn about wine in Vincouver?

Hit the wine shops.

On any given Thursday, Friday, Saturday or Sunday, there are private and provincial wine shops across town pouring samples of their wares — for free! Apart from being a pleasant thing to do, in-store tastings often lead to introductions to new labels, increased understanding of wine, the opportunity to meet other wine lovers, and the chance to taste wines that — let's face it — most people

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Here are a few of my favourite shops that hold free weekly tasting programs. Some of them I frequent often, and even if I don't buy the featured wine, I always buy something.

TAYLORWOOD WINE CELLAR VQA

1185 Mainland, 604 408-9463

TaylorwoodWines.com

(Endless RAV line construction makes getting here difficult, but it's worth the effort.)

Program: Four to six VQA (Vintners Quality Alliance) wines are organized either by winery, varietal, the season, or whimsical staff picks. Thursdays 4:30-6:30 p.m.; Sundays 3-5 p.m.

Ambiance: The warmth and coziness of the shop's décor make you imagine a fireplace crackling in the corner. The dedicated tasting bar exudes the feel of a well-trafficked winery.

Food: Crackers usually, food pairing occasionally. "In a neighbourhood full of restaurants, we think it's important to focus on the concept of food pairing and to guide customers based on what they eat," says manager Ashley Pringle.

Staff: The all-woman staff is always pleasant, and they often bring in VQA winemakers or agency reps to pour.

Clientele: Pre-dinner downtown workers and enough regulars to feel clubby. I met my best wine pal there, in the middle of a flight of merlots.

Upcoming: Decanting: When, Why and How; Sunday, Nov. 4.

FIREFLY FINE WINE AND ALES

2857 Cambie, 604 875-3325

FireflyFineWinesAndAles.com

(Under the Plaza 500 Hotel, next to FigMint, facing the RAV line construction. Best reached on foot.)

Program: Two to four wines or four to five wines and ales, organized either by producer or agency, served on an adjacent counter. An Enomatic wine-tasting machine — which holds eight different labels and dispenses a perfect one-ounce pour — is always set on "no charge." Fridays 4-7 p.m.; Saturdays 2-6 p.m.

Ambiance: Clean, bright, shiny and modern, and after having been open only six months, still no gouges in the floor. It has a spacious walk-in cooler and an amusing arrangement of local and imported wines by style, like "Sweet," "Spicy," "Crisp," "Suave," and "Teeth Stainers." "When you shop for food, you don't shop by country, and wine is no different," says manager John Hunt.

Food: Occasionally, depending on the event.

Staff: Friendly and knowledgeable, and well supported by agency reps.

Clientele: Hard to define, considering FireFly's newness and location, but medical professionals and construction workers are likely.

Upcoming: Beaujolais Nouveau paired with appies by FigMint; Thursday, Nov. 15.

VILLAGE VQA KITSILANO

1811 W. 1st, 604 732-8827

VillageVQAWines.com

Program: Usually six wines from one winery or a mix of VQA wineries; Saturdays 2-5 p.m. Food: Sometimes crackers.

Ambiance: Sleek and stylish, making smart use of a space the size of a railroad car.

Staff: As well as being knowledgeable about their wines, the staff and agency reps always seem to be in a convivial mood.

Clientele: Kitsilano young professionals. "We are a part of people's Saturday routines now, and we have a lot of regulars coming in," says manager Michelle Lemay.

Upcoming: Tinhorn Creek Winery pours an assortment of reds and whites; Saturday, Nov. 3.

VILLAGE VQA DUNBAR

3525 W. 41st, 604 269-9433

VillageVQAWines.com

Program: Five or six wines from a VQA winery, poured by the agency rep; Saturdays 3-5 p.m.

Ambiance: Straightforward and functional, it's a slightly wider space than the Kitsilano location, and seems heavily trafficked.

Food: On rare occasions.

Staff: Friendly and chatty, showing a good rapport with their customers and each other.

Clientele: The neighbourhood crowd of Kerrisdale, Dunbar and Southlands.

Upcoming: TBA. Call store for details.

BCLD SIGNATURE STORE

5555 Cambie,

604 660-9463

BCLiquor Stores.com

(The glittering crown jewel in the BCLD chain, this recently expanded store is as centrally located as it gets.)

Program: Five to eight local or international wines, organized by winery, varietal or season, presented by staff, reps or winemakers. Various days and times.

Ambiance: Think supermarket. Surrounded by departments like "Signature Spirits," "Signature Cellars," and "Wines of the World," there's the "Discover, Enjoy, Share" tasting room. This is not just a dedicated bar, but an entire kitchen devoted to food and wine. Tastefully appointed in steel, tile and wood, it resembles the set of a Food Network show, even without the hanging video screens.

Food: Mounds of bread and cheese, and whatever comes from the kitchen to pair with specific wines. Very generous.

Clientele: Every wine-drinking Vancouverite will shop here at least once a year, even if they don't need to.

Upcoming: Wines of South Africa; Saturday, Nov. 10, 2-5 p.m.

MARQUIS WINE CELLARS

1034 Davie, 604 684-0445

Marquis-Wines.com

Program: Marquis pours more new wines than anywhere else in town, and organizes them by region or season. Tastings take place every couple of months on a Saturday afternoon. "We're trying to educate people about what's out there and to push their limits in a fun way," says tasting coordinator Jon Ellison.

Ambiance: A spacious, well-lit store with a healthy selection of local and international wines, especially from France.

Staff: Well-trained and knowledgeable, nothing brings out their friendliness like their tastings.

Food: Breads and cheeses.

Clientele: Neighbours and serious collectors.

Upcoming: Champagne and sparkling wines; Saturday, Nov. 17, 1-4 p.m.

Many other wine shops offer occasional free tastings, but they don't always publicize them. As the holiday season approaches, look for spontaneous tastings supported by wineries and distributors.

- Kitsilano Wine Cellar (2235 W. 4th, 604 736-7660, Kitswine.com) hosts the occasional paid event, but distributor reps often come around to pour during the holidays.
- Liberty Wine Merchants (various locations, LibertyWineMerchants.com) hosts paid events throughout the year. If you're hoping for a free taste at its Point Grey, Robson Street or Granville Island shops, your best chance is on Friday afternoons.
- Mark Anthony (962 W. King Edward, 604 739-9463) usually has something to sample on Saturdays at 2 p.m., but you'll need to call them then to find out what's open.
- Pacific Spirits Wine Cellar (4474 Dunbar, 604 738-1299) offers tastings every Saturday from 3-6 p.m., but they're only advertised in the shop.
- Sheraton Wall Centre Wine Shop (1075 Hornby, 604 893-7254) also doesn't promote its tastings, which happen every Friday from

4-8 p.m.

The best way to keep on top of wine events in Vancouver — or anywhere in the world — is at LocalWineEvents.com. Subscribe to their email bulletin and you'll receive automatic schedules.



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