

Wine culture is booming

[By Melissa Matyas](#)

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Robust, full-bodied reds harboring rich fruit flavors, crisp and light whites with a subtle citrus burst or the classic bubbly that bites the taste buds; the wine industry is flourishing, said Dennis Minchella, owner of the Kokopelli Winery in Chandler.

The trend

Wine in the United States is slowly joining the ranks and trends of neighboring countries in Europe and South America and has become a cult must among many.

"The technology of making wine is getting better, the wine making business is becoming more popular and we are getting closer to the culture of wine similar to that of Europe," said Minchella, whose winery is one of the 16 in Arizona. Kokopelli is known for its dessert wines and mix of French, Italian, German and Americana stylings, he said.

"Every wine maker has their own unique style on the wines," Minchella added. "There could be thousands of differences among labels, but there is always some sort of influence."

Kokopelli produces 24 different bottles of wine with Arizona grown grapes, he said. The finished product is only distributed throughout Arizona and can be found in various restaurants and specialty stores like BevMo, Cost Plus World Markets and Total Wines, Minchella said.

Kokopelli Winery will be celebrating its 15-year anniversary in 2009 with its bistro/wine bar nailing down success for almost eight years.

The process

According to Minchella, wine making can be a long process but the finished product is well worth the wait. Harvest season is when the wine making magic begins.

During harvest time it is important to look for several variables like color and acid levels, he said. When the grapes are ready to be pulled from the vines they go through a process called fermentation.

"Fermentation is a process of crushing the grapes, adding yeast and then allowing them to ferment in stainless steel tanks," Minchella said. "Once all the sugar has been converted to alcohol, the fermentation process is complete."

Once the wine is made, the maker will separate the skin and pulp, adjust the wine flavor and color and allow the wine to age in stainless steel or oak barrels, he said.

"The wine will be aged for as long as a few months or many years," Michella said. "A lot of the importance is the fermentation and aging."

Wine is not only a hot commodity for at home consumption, but also a must to pair with social interaction and dining.

Local offerings

Scott Rennard, owner of Caffè Boa Ahwatukee, has a knack for all things wine. The restaurant is currently home to roughly 120 different wines, but welcomes as many as 200 at a time.

"What we have in the restaurant all depends on the season," he said. "We may go a little heavier on the reds in the winter."

Rennard said he has noticed a lot of his clientele ordering various Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs and Pinot Grigios this season. Kendall Jackson is always a big seller and Caffè Boa offers wine flights for those unsure on what to order.

A wine flight is a serving of several different reds or whites. The purpose is so clients can figure out what they enjoy the most and order a full glass or bottle.

Caffè Boa often focuses on teaching its patrons about wine while making the experience enjoyable, Rennard said.

"Every Wednesday from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. we set up a table of different wines for tasting," he said. "The wine tasting is free and if you like a wine you taste, you can order a bottle for half price."

Caffè Boa also offers a few nights every month for people to participate in wine dinners, Rennard said. The wine dinner consists of a four-course meal with specially selected wines and averages about \$60 per person, he said.

During dinner, someone will walk around the tables to teach about the wines and will hand out tokens of appreciation and small gifts, Rennard said, adding that he doesn't like his restaurant to be considered fine dining. He wants everyone to feel welcome and comfortable no matter what.

"People can come into the restaurant in a hat and shorts and feel comfortable."

Rennard said they strive to stress the food and good service. He said he prefers the feel of a privately-owned restaurant because the atmosphere is more inviting and has a family feel.

"We play live music and light fires," he said. "We do a big repeat customer base but our clientele always varies."

Rennard selects mostly high-end wines for the restaurant but keeps them affordable. House wines are available for \$5.25 a glass and \$22 a bottle.

"Most wines are served by the bottle, but we have about 20 available by the glass," Rennard said.

The house wines and a few others are the least expensive offered. Rennard said he wants everyone to be able to enjoy wine without breaking the bank.

However, for the big spenders, he showcases a number of rare bottles. The most rare and expensive bottle is a Cabernet Sauvignon called Shafer Hillside Select, which runs for \$425 a bottle.

"No matter the cost all of our wines are important and temperature controlled," Rennard said. "I think that makes a big difference."

Caffe Boa is considered restaurant casual but elegant.

"Everyone is welcome," Rennard said.

Ahwatukee Foothills resident Pat Talla said he enjoys drinking wine and really looks for the tastes he prefers.

Talla said he thinks a good wine is all in the person who makes it. He prefers robust, full-bodied reds overall and is constantly on the search for something new.

"I prefer California wines most," Talla said. "There are a few Italian wines from the Tuscany region that I enjoy as well, but the factors of taste is where the grape is grown."

Until someone really gets out there to try the different wines available, they will never really know what they like, Michella said.

When ordering

When ordering a wine in a restaurant Minchella suggests looking for a wine on the menu you are already familiar with. Focus on things that you like and always ask to taste something you have never had.

"Don't feel embarrassed about asking questions about which type of wine to order," Minchella said.

Take into account the aroma of the wine and taste in your mouth, he said. Swirl the wine to release the notes and ensure that you can benefit from all the flavors.

"There are so many people who think that wine is snooty and all that," Minchella said. "At the end of the day it's really about if you enjoy it; you don't have to spend a lot of money to find a good wine."

Melissa Matyas is interning this semester for the AFN. She is a senior at Arizona State

University.