

OVERSEAS NEWS

High-tech wine service – Promoting petite syrah – Armagnac benefits from an image overhaul.

ROLL OUT THE BARRELS

No worries with corked wine for Atlanta's hipper-than-thou dining crowd at their newest grazing and watering hole, Two Urban Licks. All of the wines, other than the bubbly stuff, are poured directly from stainless-steel kegs housed in a climate-controlled, 8m-high glass tower located at the entrance to the restaurant. Wine worshippers can choose their designated drop du jour from more than 30 of California's best, including Arrowood Grand Archer Chardonnay and Andrew Geoffrey Cabernet Franc. Wines are served by the glass and in crystal carafes by "wine thief" measures ranging from a half-bottle to a magnum.

Two Urban Licks' partner/owner Todd Rushing came up with the idea after seeing 45-litre-capacity steel barrels being used by his winemaker buddies for short-term storage. His next step was to persuade them to sell him wine by the barrel – *et voilà*, his novel concept was up and flowing.

It's a win-win situation for vinophiles, too. "Wine in the barrel is cheaper to produce than making it with bottles, corks, labels and boxes," Rushing says. "There is a cost saving of up to US\$1.50 [A\$1.95] a bottle. I pass this straight along to my customers." There are some caveats. Wine on tap needs a little more TLC than wine in bottle. Rushing uses measured doses of argon for reds and nitrogen for whites to maintain the wines in peak condition. Temperature also counts, so even reds are kept below *chambré*. For winers and diners, Rushing has it just right. **ANTHONY MANIFOLD**

NOT SO PETITE SYRAH

"Gutsy, big, bold and black," is how Californian winemaker John Monnich describes the love of his life. He's talking about the gob-smacking wine made from petite syrah – a grape that's a wolf in sheep's clothing and rarely grown outside America. Domestic winemakers have traditionally blended a dash of it with zinfandel, cabernet sauvignon and even pinot noir to enhance colour and reinforce backbone in the finished wine. Monnich passionately believes that the inky-hued libation crafted from petite syrah, with its densely layered fruit concentration and fierce tannins, is quite capable of holding its own.

As a tribute, Monnich and about 190 like-minded vigneronns founded PS I Love You – a band of apostles dedicated to promoting petite syrah's vinous virtues. Members of the group set out by train from San Francisco each year on a mission to spread the gospel of the grape, travelling as far as Dallas and Chicago. It's known as the Blue Tooth Tour, to give communicants a subtle hint about how their pearlies will look after dousing them in PS's colourful charms. Free toothbrushes are included with every tasting as further mementos of the wine's purple powers.

During the tour, PS promoters point out that "petite", while accurately describing the size of PS's vine leaf, significantly understates the punch packed by the grape itself. "Syrah" is another misnomer. It is clonally connected with the grape of the same name – however, its closest relative is the rarely seen *durif* variety. For Monnich and his partners, PS's fulsome flavours more than make up for its oxymoronic appellation. Ain't love grand.

ANTHONY MANIFOLD

ARMAGNAC ATTACK

France's Armagnac producers are enjoying something of a boom. Long seen as the baby brother to Cognac (itself seeing drops in market share and problems with overproduction, as with much of France), Armagnac's sales to the UK rose 42 per cent last year, and it recently won a number of prestigious awards. The traditional *digéstitif* has been dusting off its old image and is being promoted across Europe as a key cocktail ingredient and epicurean alternative to Cognac and whisky.

This success isn't just confined to the Armagnacs of the Gascony district – Côtes de Gascogne wines were one of only three areas in the country last year to see sales go up (the others being Chablis and Champagne).

Armagnac recently joined red wine in being named as a contributor to the "French paradox" – alcoholic drinks that seem to offer health benefits. After studies at the University of Bordeaux, research confirmed that a moderate daily consumption of Armagnac had a positive effect on the body's defence system, contributing to prevention of heart attacks and thrombosis. Appropriately, inhabitants of Gascony hold the French record for the greatest longevity. **JA**



SWIPE, SNIFF, SLURP

America's first wine tasting automat has opened in San Francisco's Mission district. With 10 high-tech steel-and-mahogany tasting stations, VinoVenue lets wine enthusiasts dispense 30ml samples for themselves, starting at US\$1.20 (A\$1.56) for Calixa Cabernet Sauvignon and rocketing to US\$28.50 (A\$37) for the 1997 vintage of France's most succulent sticky, Château d'Yquem (above).

Punters purchase smart cards with values from US\$10 to US\$100, then swipe and slurp their way through their choice of more than 100 different drops. Descriptors of the samples sipped are recorded electronically by the cards for subsequent retrieval by the taster. All the wines available for tasting can be bought by the bottle or the case. VinoVenue can also provide tasting space for gatherings of cork dorks in its Boardroom and Velvet Room suites.

Life partners and founders of VinoVenue, Mary Lynn Slattery and Nancy Rowland believe they have a unique marketing edge over conventional wine bars when it comes to degustation. "It's very difficult for them to open as many wines as we have without having them go bad," Slattery says. "All our wines are argon infused, which enables them to remain fresh." First-time taster Gerry Canal agrees: "It's amazing. I feel like a kid in a candy store here."

Read more at www.vinovenue.net.

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