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WINE

Wine Country's best find happy home in SF

By VIRGINIE BOONE
 THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

It's 5 p.m. on a Wednesday and the Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant bar in San Francisco is packed to standing room only. Bartenders place flights of wine (five different tastes) on descriptive paper mats and offer tumblers of water and plates of Acme bread and Cowgirl Creamery cheese.

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The main event on this night is a tasting of Marston Family Vineyard cabernet sauvignon, a 500-case St. Helena producer whose wines are made by superstar consultant Philippe Melka. Marston's wines are not only hard to find, they can be a challenge to taste, since the winery doesn't have a tasting room of its own.

"We're not open to the public, and we only make a teeny-tiny amount," said Kimberly Fairbank, Marston's general manager. "Most of the time, you're only going to find it in very select restaurants and retailers like Ferry Plaza and Dean & DeLuca, and that's it."

Wines like Marston -- locally made, rare, or, to many, not yet known -- are getting their due with a wider audience in San Francisco, finding new fans through the Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant's regular tasting events.

"Sometimes we taste something, and we can't wait to get it in a glass for our customers," said Debbie Zachareas, one of the primary partners in the Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant, and wine director and partner in Bacar, a San Francisco restaurant.

Wine lovers come for the wines, but stay for the easy access to winemakers and vintners, booked for occasional Wednesday nights, who casually mingle, answer questions and rub shoulders with people trying their wines. The camaraderie can create a following the winery didn't previously have.

"They have an e-mail list of serious wine lovers that will come just for these kinds of tastings," said Fairbank, who traveled to

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FERRY TASTINGS

Upcoming events at the Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant:

Jan. 25 -- Bob Sessions and Michael Terrien of Hanzell Winery

Feb. 8 -- Philippe Melka pours some of his boutique wines

Feb. 22 -- Robert Biale pours Robert Biale zinfandels

March 8 -- Rand Yazzolino presents rare Italian wines

March 22 -- Gary Pisoni and Gary Franscioni from Pisoni Vineyard and Garys' Vineyard

Tastings are 4:30-7:30 p.m.

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the Ferry Plaza from St. Helena with Elizabeth Marston. Since arriving at 4:30 p.m. (events last about three hours), the two have been walking around, visiting each table and answering questions about the wines.

"The Ferry Plaza gets people coming to and from work on a consistent basis, people from all over the world visiting here as tourists," Fairbank continued. "It has a huge local following, and that's very special."

Half-an-hour into the event, 32 flights have already been poured, priced at \$32 for a taste of vintages 1998 through 2002. A bottle of Marston cabernet sauvignon retails for about \$80.

"Being such a tiny boutique cab producer, (such an event) allows us to have people really get to know the wine, the family history and understand what the vineyard's all about," Fairbank said, "but mostly put the wine in their mouths."

Marston added: "That's why events like this are so important. We're such a small family business that we want to meet everybody and bring them into our extended wine family."

A group of friends, trying the Marston flight this evening, are impressed by the caliber of wines and winemakers featured at the Ferry Plaza.

"They're getting interesting people. They had Grace Family Vineyards here last year and [Dick Grace] hasn't done a tasting in 14 years," said Alex Slawson, who works nearby. He and co-workers signed on to receive regular e-mail notices about such tastings.

"They pull in stuff that's unique," added friend Cameron Crebs. "It's not like a big event where you're going to find a big name -- Gallo or Beringer."

Winemakers appreciate having such a home for their wines as much as wine drinkers like having the chance to try those wines.

"A true wine merchant is a rare thing," commented Mi-chael Terrien, winemaker for storied Sonoma pinot noir and chardonnay producer Hanzell Vineyards.

Terrien will be pouring Hanzell wines at the Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant tonight. Joining him will be consulting winemaker Bob Sessions, a veteran of Hanzell since 1973.

"A true wine merchant makes it possible for the customer to have a better buying relationship, rather than having to follow scores. It's the empowering of the individual," Terrien said.

Hanzell has been making wine since the 1950s. Like Marston, the winery is rarely open to the public and Hanzell wines can be tough to find and try, especially older vintages.

Terrien will be bringing older Hanzell pinot noirs to the Wine Merchant tasting, and he can't wait to see what people think.

"I like the idea of talking to people about what they're tasting with older wines," he said. "Many of the people won't be familiar with the Hanzell legacy. We can do our own proselytizing about wines that age extremely well."

Though he'll be doing his part to sell Hanzell tonight, Terrien is happy to have a proponent of his wines in San Francisco.

"If you get a person who believes in your wine, they can sell it very, very well," he said. "Enthusiasm is the most effective selling tool in the bag."

You can reach Staff Writer Virginie Boone at 521-5440 or vboone@pressdemocrat.com.

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