

Barrel tasting provides sneak peak at next wine vintage

By Kathryn Reed

SOMERSET – It was one of those only in El Dorado County days. Schussing through fresh powder in the morning at Sierra-at-Tahoe, drinking from the barrel in the afternoon at foothill wineries.

With 26 wineries to choose from for the annual Bring out the Barrel wine tasting event, we knew we couldn't hit them all in a day – or even two. But the three we managed to visit Sunday we'd go back to without an event to lure us there.



Richard
Stading
explains
what's in the
barrel at
Auriga.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

What makes this weekend special is being able to taste from the barrel to know what is on the horizon. Some of the wineries sell futures. This means paying for the bottles now at usually a reduced rate compared to what it will be once it is released. It can be a gamble, or it can be a great investment.

At Cantiga Wineworks, it was all about education on this last weekend of January. No futures were even available.

“The education component is key in our wine style,” owner Richard Rorden said. “We are using this to show wine as it ages.”

Plenty of people hovered around the barrels containing samples of the 2008 and 2010 Zinfandel. To some, a full glass or a bottle would have been fine to have right then.

But that’s not what Rorden and his wife, Christine, are about. Their philosophy is to embrace the European-style of winemaking, where the fruit remains in the barrel longer. It takes about five years before they are satisfied and will put their wines in a bottle.

“Wine needs acidity. Without it, it is hard to pair with food,” Rorden said.

Creating wine that goes well with food is more important to Cantiga than having people open a bottle and just drink. Food is such an integral part of their wine that even on non-event occasions there is food out for people to sample with the wine.

On this special barrel tasting weekend, most wineries had something to share with guests besides wine.

At Auriga Wine Cellars, which has moved its tasting facility to Pleasant Valley Road, a pasta dish is being paired with the Tuscan blend that is dominated by Sangiovese.

The Tuscan will be bottled in April and tastes ready now.

“I don’t see it changing much,” owner Richard Stading said of the Tuscan. “A lot of times in the barrel it’s really yummy and then in the bottle (people say) this isn’t what I bought. A couple months from now this will not change.”

The barrel tasting was an opportunity for Richard and Diane Stading to show off the larger tasting area. This summer they expect to have special events on the grassy lawn out back.

They picked up more than a dozen new club members during the two-day event, so that made it profitable beyond the sound of the cash register ringing.

This is the fourth year of Bring out the Barrel, which is put on by the El Dorado Winery Association. And it's the first year it has sold out. Last year 1,200 tickets were sold, this year 2,000.

Elliot Graham at Busby Cellars said it was wall-to-wall people at the tasting room Saturday afternoon. He and his wife, Sherrie, and their workers were doing a brisk business Sunday, too.

Overall, he said things have been steady despite the economy, with sales increasing last year. He attributes this partly to people never stop drinking wine, and smaller wineries like Busby that produce 2,000 cases a year don't have the distribution costs others have.

The next big event in the El Dorado County wine region is Passport Weekend, the last weekend of March and first weekend of April. This, too, can sell out.

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