

# TASTE OF THE TOWN

Cleanse your palate and get to know your local wines

BY ADRIENNE VAN DER VALK

I've always found that the easiest way to sound knowledgeable about something is to find someone who has actually *learned* about it and just repeat what they say. This is the approach I have always taken to the subject of wine. It's not that I don't appreciate wine; it's just that for the amount of appreciating I do, it seems like I should have gleaned a little more legitimate cork-speak along the way. This is where your local wine tasting can come in very handy. These events are full of people who can't *stop* talking about wine *and* they gladly get you tipsy for (almost) free! Strictly for research purposes, I headed out for a tour of a handful of businesses that offer Friday night wine tastings to get a feel for how the Eugene wine lovers' scene varies from neighborhood to neighborhood.

My first stop is Friendly Street Market, where we're greeted by pourer Chris Molly. Chris works for a distributor, but he fits right in at Friendly Street, which is a little natural food market filled with the familiar sights and smells of the crunchy, organic food world in Eugene.

"This crowd tends to gravitate toward red wine," he tells me — although I see no crowd other than myself and a couple of tie-dye bedecked neighborhood ladies who explain to me that a lot of the regulars go on vacation after the Country Fair. Chris is pouring a variety of Twin Fin tonight, wines he describes as "quaffing wines, taste great, go down easy and rea-

sonably priced." He likes to feature Oregon wines when he can, but he also picks his lineup based on season and price. Chris is an affable fellow who sounds like he knows his stuff (I'd rip off his jargon any day), and Friendly Street provides a casual, non-pretentious atmosphere in which to "quaff."

I then wander on to The Broadway, where pourer Nancy Rodriguez is staving off a thirsty mob of sunburned, middle-aged Eugeneans while waiting for her next round of tasting glasses to arrive from the kitchen. Nancy is a trained wine steward and chef who was specially hired to do The Broadway's tastings, a gig she describes as "the greatest job in the world!" By the time the glasses arrive, she's gathered quite a crowd and quickly begins dispensing the evening's choices: an Artesa Chardonnay from California, a cab/merlot/syrah blend by Saviah Cellars in Washington and a Kermit Lynch Chinon Rosé from France, all from '05 (price range \$16-\$20). The selections are made by one of The Broadway's owners.

The Broadway's Friday night scene would also be considered "casual," I guess, but in a tucked-in-polo-shirt and coordinated-beach-separates kind of way. My boyfriend later swears we were sitting next to Kitty Piercy at the bar. Rodriguez has a gentle, understated presence, is obviously extremely well versed in her vinos and is accustomed to pouring for an upscale clientele.



SIVA

Monroe Street Market is stop number three, and it's packed with salt-of-the-earth Eugene types of a variety of ages. Unlike Friendly Street, Monroe is more restaurant and bottle market than corner store, and their wine buyer Siva has obviously generated quite a following. It isn't just the blonde pigtailed and hot-pink fishnets; Siva's infectious enthusiasm for the wines she chooses has made this little hideaway a hot spot between 6 and 8 pm on Fridays. The tasting is \$2 per person, but the pours are at least two ounces, and the festive, community atmosphere makes it feel like an event. Siva tells me she tries to feature organic wines when available. Monroe Street also raffles off the remainder of the wine after the tasting ends (a tall, dreadlocked young man is pointed out to me as an uncannily frequent winner of this prize) as well as hand-blown wine stoppers made by the Eugene Glass School as a benefit for homeless youth.

As I prepare to wobble out of Monroe Street, Siva asks me if I am going to go see Sterling at New Frontier. This is not the first time the mysterious "Sterling" has been mentioned on the Friday night circuit, so I decide to make a detour and head over to 8th Ave. When we get to New Frontier, the only wine-swilling customer left is a kid who is showing Sterling his new tattoo. The tasting is five minutes from over, but Sterling graciously invites us to sample a sauvignon blanc, a pinot gris and a cabernet sauvignon from Concannon Vinyards, a California wine-maker. "Sometimes I do all organics," he explains. "Sometimes I do all Italians. Sometimes I do all of one kind." Sterling is

the wine buyer for New Frontier. He likes doing the tastings, he says, because "people come on their way home in their relaxed state. They are thinking about their evening and choosing wine because they want to make their friends happy."

I tell Sterling we are on our way to the last stop of the night, the Territorial tasting room on 3rd. It turns out he works there too, and he invites us to a shindig they throw the first Thursday of every month called D'Vine night. The invitation is reiterated by Lisa Rennie, who graces Territorial's bar with her mane of strawberry blonde hair and thousand watt smile. The only actual wine bar we visit that night, the colorful, modern space is a perfect environment in which to relax and digest the last tastes of the evening: a pinot gris, Riesling and two pinot noirs from '05 as well as a couple of '03 reserves. At \$7 a flight, the generous pours, hilarious service ("I'm the blabber mouth," Lisa tells us. "Sterling knows about wine.") and artsy atmosphere make Territorial one of those nice little escapes that make you feel a little more cosmopolitan than most Eugene establishments.

After five wine tastings in a row, I can't say I remember enough lingo to impress anyone at my next dinner party, but I do feel like I could make an informed suggestion on where to take just about anyone for a fun way to launch a Friday evening. Almost every stop includes a price range accessible to any drinker willing to spring above and beyond Gato Negro. Don't forget other local favorites like Sundance Wine Cellars, Lavelle, WineStyles and Cornucopia — just be sure to call ahead for days and times.



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