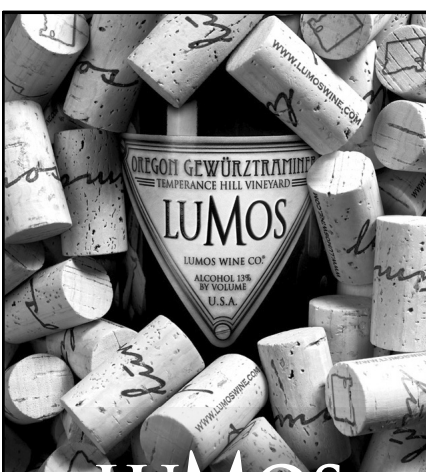


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Ich Bin Ein Pfalzer

Giving German wines a go at 'S Wine BY LANCE SPARKS

Kind of a fun chapter in the lore of Wine World tells us that when the conquering

Roman legions reached the northern valleys of what is now Germany, they decided they had also reached the climatic limits for the growing of wine grapes — and there was no compelling reason to conquer a place where they couldn't make their wine. (Some of this might've been rationalization, as the Teutonic tribes were also really nasty fighters who seemed to delight in slaughter and mayhem, a fact that centuries later came back on southerners when the armies of Goths and Visigoths sacked Rome and, in effect, became the Holy Roman Empire.)

In any case, the Romans were wrong, at least in part, because wine grapes (some) thrive in those cooler regions, and the wines made there are delicious, complex and versatile with a broad range of foods.

Still, it's well known among wine retailers that there's almost no harder sell — especially to Americans — than German wines.

So why would a smart, energetic wine entrepreneur like Monika McEachern choose to specialize in German wines, and locate her attractive little store in, of all places, tiny, rural Pleasant Hill? Partly, McEachern says, because she's German-bred (though actually born in Sydney, Australia), and knows and loves the wines of that region. "I'm doin' okay," she says.

McEachern's shop, 'S Wine, is located in the Ray's shopping center, in what amounts to the urban core of Pleasant Hill, just off Highway 58, about a 10-plus minute drive from Eugene. It's small, warm and welcoming, with antique tables and comfy chairs (outside seating in summer). The walls are decorated by works from local artists, with a retail space displaying porcelains, salad dressings, chocolates, even a few beers. McEachern also serves her homemade soups and breads (try her whole wheat with flax, chewy crust and soft middle — delish), plus cheeses and other nibbles to accompany tastes and/or glasses of her selected wines: whites, reds, rosés, sparklers and incredible dessert wines.

Also on display are about 50 German wines, all from the Pfalz and Baden regions of southern Germany, much less known than wines from the northern river valleys of the Moselle and Rhine. (And these are the regions where the Romans ended up planting their grapes and making their wines; just ask McEachern and she'll show you the maps and pics.)

Pfalz and Baden are warmer — "And the soils are much different," McEachern adds — and although the growers there, like their northland neighbors, favor the Riesling grape, they also grow some notable other grapes, even some reds. "The wines really sell themselves," McEachern says. "The trick is to get people in here to try them. Once they taste, they usually come back for a bottle."

McEachern, 53, is attractive and dynamic, with short-cut reddish hair, bright blue eyes, a snappy grin and a big laugh. The daughter of a German diplomat, she grew up in various capitals across the world before settling, with musician husband William McEachern, in Pleasant Hill in 1991.



MONIKA MCEACHERN PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

In her own terms, she's "Small Monika" (she stands a shade over five feet) to distinguish her from "Big Monika" (maybe 5'10"), who is Monika Rauch, her close friend and another force in importing (owner of Kastle Hill, importer of select wines) and selling the wines of Pfalz and Baden.

Together, Rauch and McEachern have traveled the regions where both originated, and they work closely to choose and promote the wines. Recently, Big Monika succeeded in placing, as wine specials, two of her selections in Sabai, the popular new Thai restaurant in the Oakway Center. The wines — an off-dry Riesling and a Scheurebe — brilliantly complement the spicy and lively Thai dishes. "They're also great with Indian cuisine," says "Small Monika."

These German white wines are fresh, with pear/apple/citrus flavors, usually with a touch of sweetness that rounds out the flavors but is balanced with a zesty acidity that keeps them from seeming cloying or flabby. The reds rely on a grape called Dornfelder, but also include Spatburgunder (pinot noir, though of course the Germans don't use the French name).

Still not sure? Daunted a little by the labels and problems of pronunciation? Think you'd like to try before you buy? "I let people pick," McEachern says. "Then I'll open a bottle, let them taste, then sell the rest by the glass. So that's really kinda fun."

Prices are moderate. Glass pours run to \$6, and bottles range between \$17 to an upper end of \$38 (that special Spatburgunder) to \$54 for a half-bottle of spectacular dessert wine designated as Beerenauslese.

'S Wine has been in its location only two months, but it's already a social hub, even offering live music on some weekend nights. "I have a lot of regulars already," McEachern says. Easy to see why: Between the delicious wines, the cozy space and the gracious, fun-loving presence of "Small Monika" McEachern, the little shop just rocks bucolic Pleasant Hill. It's a brief drive to a good time and new discoveries.

If the Romans had only known... ❖