



EUGENE'S CUP OVERFLOWETH

South Eugene's **Sundance Wine Cellars** has the wine and the staff to find the best stuff

BY HENRY HOUSTON

When you enter Sundance Wine Cellars, it's akin to entering a used bookstore: Instead of books, wine bottles fill shelves and unopened boxes of wine wait on the floor. And instead of stories from authors around the world, wine labels offer customers a taste of grapes from different regions of the globe.

The deep sea of red and white at Sundance can be intimidating if you don't know what you want. But the cellar has the knowledgeable staff to help you navigate the store.

Store owner Gavin McComas says Sundance probably has the most Oregon wine bottles in the world and has the second-largest overall wine collection in the state. Sundance has more than 500 Oregon pinot noirs and more than 5,000 different wines.

"I don't know if anyone else in the Northwest is dumb enough to maintain that sort of inventory," he laughs.

McComas adds that it's indulgent to have such an encyclopedic inventory because, like a bookstore, 10 percent of the store's inventory makes up 90 percent of the store's sales.

Luckily, the store has manager Randy Stokes, who, McComas says, "has the most amazing brain that can remember 5,000 wines."

Stokes has more than 30 years of experience and once even picked grapes during harvest in France (which he said was some of the hardest work he ever did, and he

won't do it again). He navigates through the forest of wine labels with ease and is able to recommend wines to fit a customer's palate.

"If they seem like an adventurer, I kind of steer off a little just to get them something different in their mouth," he says. "We can get in those ruts where we get the same thing."

So I ask Stokes, without saying the recommendation is for me, what he'd suggest to someone who sticks mostly with Willamette Valley pinot noirs. Right away, he says going to France would be his first choice — then pointing to Germany and England and maybe California (though with a caveat that the Golden State isn't the best for pinot noir).

Before COVID-19 hit the U.S., its presence in Italy made the news, and Stokes says many customers came in to buy Italian wines to show solidarity with the country. Now, customers are buying Oregon wines (as they did before the pandemic). The preference for local wines is the reason why the store devotes so much floor space for Oregon wineries.

Although Eugene has grocery stores like the Amazon-owned Whole Foods and chains such as Market of Choice and Fred Meyer, Stokes says Sundance works with smaller distributors. This gives customers a chance to taste wines from smaller wineries.

He says one distributor the store works with is a Portland-based company that buys from small, family-owned wineries in Italy and imports the wine to Oregon. Smaller wineries develop their wine through more art and craft and aren't using a lab to meet market research, as

corporate wine companies do.

Stokes says he wishes people in the U.S. wouldn't think that you have to be pretentious when describing wine. To Stokes, it's just grape juice, and drinkers should think about whether they like it and not try to talk like a wine label.

And he says he wants to debunk the treatment of rosé as a sweet wine.

"Rosés are highly underrated," he says. "People still have the conception that rosés are sweet. Those are people who were drinking wine in the '70s who haven't understood that the tradition wasn't to make a sweet wine."

He says that those sweet wines from California were a waste product in the process of making other wines; it was the runoff needed to get grapes ready for the real wine. But it turns out the winemakers of the '70s and '80s thought it tasted good.

"That's how Americans got to know pink wine," he says. "I think when most people who walk up to this aisle and see all this pink, they think it's all sweet."

Except for one bottle at the store, the rosés Sundance carries aren't sweet, he says. He wishes people would explore rosé more often.

So I grabbed a bottle of rosé of pinot from Junction City's Brigadoon as a way for me to veer off my usual wine path. I opened the bottle at home and found on the first taste the tartness that turned me into an immediate fan.

Sundance Wine Cellars is located at 2441 Hilyard Street and offers curbside delivery during the pandemic. Call 541-687-9463 for more information.