

Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

Columnist checks out Tucson's wine country

Have you ever visited wine country? I don't mean the Napa Valley or Sonoma Valley in California, or even Sonoita or Elgin in southern Arizona.

I'm talking about Tucson's conglomerate wine country – the places where you buy the wine you drink. You have lots of choices don't you?

Let's start with the "big-box" wine specialty stores that have recently come to Tucson, places like Total Wine & More and BevMo. These stores offer literally thousands of different wines at discount prices and with aggressive marketing, threaten to overwhelm longer standing wine outlets in Tucson.

Once in a while, Pat and I will find an incredible deal on one of our favorite wines; then it's time to stock up at one of the big-boxes.

Before these big-boxes came to town, the kings of the hill were general retail big-box stores with large wine departments, like Costco and Cost Plus World Market. Maybe Walmart, Target, and Kmart fit in this category too. Your reason for going to these stores is probably not to buy wine, but while you're there for other items, you take the opportunity to look at the wine offerings.

Pat and I have been impressed with the reasonable prices and consistent quality of the selections at Costco and Cost Plus and give kudos to the unknown buyers for these establishments.

Other places that you do go to buy wine include two long-time established liquor and wine specialty stores, Plaza Liquor at 2642 North Campbell Avenue and RumRunner at 3131 East First Street. For their relatively modest size, these stores have quite a selection of wines and a knowledgeable staff. If you can't find what you're looking for, they are generally willing to order a bottle or two for you.

I also include in this wine specialty store category the recently-opened Wine Depot at 3840 East Grant Road. Don't be put off (or attracted) by the name, implying big-box variety and quantity. This store, housed in a highly refrigerated small building, features Old World (European) wines. Pat and I enjoyed our first visit to the store last month and wish it well.

Restaurants are another source for wine purchases in Tucson. The Dish Restaurant is associated with the Rum Runner. Maynard's Market at 400 North Toole Avenue, in an old-railroad-station atmosphere, displays a comprehensive wine selection in the market portion of their facility, complementing the fine lunch and dinner menu in the restaurant. Pastiche Modern Eatery at 3025 North Campbell Avenue offers dinner with wine specials from their own wine shop. One of our favorites for a combined dinner-with-wine-purchase deal was VinTabla, which unfortunately recently closed. Armitage Wine Lounge & Café at La Encantada shopping center is

slightly different – you order “behind the bar” wines from a wine list, either to drink there or to take home. Elle – A Wine Country Restaurant, at 3048 East Broadway Boulevard, does the same thing. Zona 78 at 78 West River Road, patterned after a neighborhood Italian eatery, operates similarly, providing behind the bar wines to drink with your food or to go.

At the same time that the big-box wine stores are trying to corner the Tucson wine market, grocery stores, drug stores, and even convenience stores are expanding their wine selections, trying to catch the eye and pocketbook of customers who are in their stores primarily on non-wine-related business.

When one of our favorite wines is on sale at one of the major grocery store chains, Pat and I additionally take advantage of the 10% discount on six-packs. We’ll also occasionally go out of our way to visit AJ’s Fine Foods at La Encantada, where the staff is particularly knowledgeable and helpful in wine selection.

There is one last category of wine provider that I want to talk about – the small neighborhood wine shop. Our runaway favorite here is CataVinos (Spanish for wine tasting), at 3063 North Alvernon Way, where no wine of several hundred choices costs more than \$15.

Pat and I have attended wine-tastings at CataVinos once a week since the shop opened almost two years ago. Tastings occur on several evenings per week, with different themes each week. You can also throw a private tasting party, hosted by CataVinos, at the wine shop or any other place you choose, like your home.

Regular wine-tasting customers get their first names engraved on wine glasses that are assigned familiar places on corner racks in the wine tasting room. Pat and I always share a wine-tasting, so our single glass has “Pat” on one side, “Bob” on the other.

At the Friday or Saturday tastings you might be entertained by an art show, a travelog, a local music group, or even a magician.

Tuesday evenings at CataVinos have become “wine class” nights. Attendees learn all about wines, especially pairing with food.

CataVinos is owned and operated by Yvonne Foucher, an architect, who in 2007 decided to try her hand at the risky wine business. Still able to smile and laugh easily after battling for two years to stay alive in the Tucson wine market, Yvonne makes CataVinos a fun place to be. She is assisted by a young, able, cheerful staff, mostly students at the University of Arizona.

CataVinos is a great place to get together with friends or make new friends. Quoting a recent *Tucson Weekly* review, “It’s so cozy you can’t help but talk to the people sitting nearby.”

Over time, Yvonne has picked up on what kinds of wine that Pat and I like, somehow remembering our wine-buying history. We appreciate the personal attention, friendly service, and the opportunity to discover new wines in a relaxed atmosphere.

So what does the future hold for Tucson's wine country? The market for wine is increasing phenomenally, even in the face of these hard financial times. But, will the smaller wine shops be able to survive the cutthroat competition from the big boxes? I certainly hope so!

You can keep your own tab on local wine happenings by subscribing to "The Juice," an online newsletter sponsored by Singles Travel International.



*Bob Ring and Pat Wood share a wine-tasting at their favorite neighborhood wine shop, CataVinos.
(Photo courtesy of Bob Ring)*