

DISCOVER THE UNDISCOVERED

More than 80 Californian wines from 22 boutique wineries are on tap at a bar that dispenses by the glass

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Wines from Fritz, Cass, Anaba, and R&B are among the many boutique wines now available at a new wine bar.

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▲ Susan Darwin, centre, Chief Branding Officer of California Vintage, joins CEO Michael Sadak, left, and General Manager Jeff Ronan, to introduce 22 labels from small wineries.

Speaking of California, home to the biggest Hollywood stars, the image of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie dashing through Beverly Hills in a convertible comes to mind. Like the couple, California wines have also been creating a buzz in global markets as the price of emerging labels from the leading New World country close in on the price tags of Bordeaux. However, you don't have to burn a hole in your pocket to get a bottle of Opus One for a taste of California.

"Of the 3,000 wineries in California, 2,900 of them are family-owned boutique wineries. But the ones we get in Asia are the mass produced ones from big companies. So we thought to ourselves: why don't we open a bar and bring these amazing wines, the true taste of California, directly to wine lovers," says Susan Darwin, Chief Branding Officer of California Vintage, a recently-opened food and wine bar on Wyndham Street.

It was the brainchild of a group of Californians craving for good value, quality Californian wines

in Hong Kong. The bar is equipped with wine dispensers and has partnered with 22 labels to offer 88 wines in tasting, half or full glass portions. The labels were handpicked by Darwin and President and Chief Operating Officer Ralph Roberts, who spent a year-and-a-half knocking on doors of wineries to sample their produce.

"In general, the California tradition is to let the fruit express itself more so than you have gotten historically in the Old World wines, as we let the fruit ripen a little further before harvesting," says Darwin, a former accountant based in San Francisco who has been involved in the wine sector for 25 years. "But there's a story behind every bottle of wine we brought back. Every winery has its own unique winemaking style."

For instance, San Francisco attorney Bill Nachbaur traded in his law books for books on viticulture, pruning shears, and a tractor when he purchased Alegría Vineyards in 1990, a small parcel in the Russian River Valley of Sonoma County. Soon



after, his wife Betsy also abandoned her career to join him and set up the Acorn label.

"When you walk into their vineyards, you see all these different red grapes intertwined with white grapes. Acorn is one of the few wineries in California that practise the tradition of inter-planting complementary varietals in a single vineyard, which can be found in Italy and some parts of Rhone Valley. And they'll tell you everything about their grapes and oaks. You can really feel their passion," says Darwin.

Their passion comes through in their star product Medley, made by harvesting and fermenting 20 varieties of grapes, including Zinfandel, Syrah, and Cabernet Franc. "When I first drank it, I got all these different tastes all over the palate. It's really like a symphony," says Michael Sadak, Chief Executive Officer and Chief Financial Officer. "Despite its outstanding quality, you get to try a glass for just over HK\$100 at our bar. As we're bringing the wine directly from the winery, we can eliminate all the mark-up from the middlemen."

Their partner boutique wineries make fewer than 5,000 cases a year, so most of the produce has never been shipped to Asia. "They all chipped in. Not only the wineries, but also the companies that provided the wine dispensers and the interior design for the bar invested as well. We all believe the wine bar concept will do well in Asia as it's just opening up to wine appreciation," says Sadak.

The bar is the first of 20 outlets that the group plans to establish throughout Asia in next five years. The idea was conceived when Hong Kong repealed

the wine tax two years ago. "As Asian wine lovers are eager to know more about wine, we offer tasting portions to help them map their palate, so they don't have to rely on brand names, scores or awards anymore," says Darwin, whose favourite among the 88 choices is the Cabernet Sauvignon from Tierra Roja in Napa Valley.

Spanish for red earth, Tierra Roja was named after the 4.5-acre vineyard in Oakville when Linda Neal bought it in the late 1980s. She only makes 300 cases of Cabernet Sauvignon. "This is a wine that will knock your socks off. It's a full sensory experience as the wine keeps evolving on your palate for 20 minutes after you swallow it. To me, it's better than Opus One although it doesn't have any score or award. That's a good example of seeing behind the label," says Darwin.

Since the bar aims to allow both connoisseurs and casual drinkers to explore boutique wines in a relaxing environment, it will be hosting tasting events and lunches with sommeliers regularly. Well-informed staff will answer questions, while iPads loaded with information about the boutique wineries are at their fingertips.

"Our bar also serves authentic California bites. Food and wine pairing allows patrons to try out wines that they normally wouldn't order," says Darwin, who hopes get the word out that California wines are distinct and diverse. "We have everything in California – Bordeaux, Burgundy, Tuscany and Rioja – you name it. All you have to do is to open up your mind and take a sip of our quality hand-crafted wines. That's the real deal." ▲

▲ Wine dispensers are installed for patrons to savour a glass of wine in tasting, half or full portions.