

Don't fear the tasting room

Local wineries want to 'break down the walls of intimidation'

Here is a dilemma many will face this summer: You want to spend an afternoon at a winery tasting room, sampling the local wines and broadening your horizons.

You are reasonably familiar with wine (Franzia counts, right?), but you are afraid to look uninformed in front of the professional winemakers and bar staff.

What are you supposed to say when they start tossing around terms like "bouquet" and "nose?" When you begin sweating profusely and feeling your ignorance engulfing you like quicksand, what should you do?

Bob Begin, owner of Chateau Chantal, a Traverse City winery/vineyard, has a piece of advice: "Relax."

Watch what you drink ...

A general rule when visiting a tasting room: Don't drink anything that you have not specifically been told to drink.

Why?

Many wineries keep a spit bucket or "dump bucket" near the bar for those who don't want to drink all the wine they taste.

Oftentimes, people who are visiting more than one winery in a day or trying many different types of wine want to avoid the inebriating effects of the alcohol.

The dump jug, while it allows people to enjoy the wine without having to bring a designated driver along, can make for some embarrassing situations.

Begin remembers a day when his winery was so

busy they had to set up a second tasting room in the cellar. Eventually, there was a lull in the crowd, and the employee downstairs took a bathroom break.

"While he was in there, a couple came up to the bar. The man saw the dump jug on the counter, poured himself a glass and began to drink it," Begin said. When the employee came back, he quickly stopped the man and explained the situation. Distraught, the couple left.

Begin actually received a call from the State Board of Health regarding the incident, but considering the circumstances, no formal investigation followed.

Contrary to the perception of wine-tasting and wine appreciation as pretentious and esoteric, local vintners aim their wine tastings at the entire consumer spectrum, from those who have never tasted wine to those who fancy themselves aficionados, said Bob Begin, owner of Chateau Chantal.

"The only thing that counts is finding what you like," he added.

Ed O'Keefe, president of Chateau Grand Traverse, claims that you will not find

intimidating pretentiousness at local wineries.

"Most of the snobbery and mystique (associated with wine) comes from outside of the winery — places like restaurants, wine shops and wine competitions," said O'Keefe, adding, "At the winery, we're basically just glorified farmers."

At Chateau Chantal, the staff can give demonstrations of proper wine etiquette in restaurants if requested.

"Basically, you look, smell and taste to decide whether the wine is soundly made," said Begin.

If the wine looks cloudy, there may be a bacterial problem. Gently swirling the wine and inhaling the aroma will expose any bad smell the wine might have.

In most cases, if the wine has gone bad, it will be obvious, said Begin, "You're really just looking for that jockstrap-behind-the-boiler smell."

When you finally taste the wine, slurp it like hot coffee or soup, pulling air into your mouth and getting more of the flavor of the wine.

(Note: If you are unsure of your slurping technique,

practice in front of the mirror at home, since choking and sputtering in front of the winery staff is likely to heighten any existing insecurity you may feel.)

In tasting rooms, you will usually be given a list of available wines, including descriptions of their characteristics. Often, someone at the bar will help you narrow down your choices based on what you know about your own preference.

But if you are completely unfamiliar with wine, fear not — the staff will suggest an assortment of wines, usually progressing from dry to sweet.

O'Keefe warns that many wine novices often prefer sweeter wines at first. "(If they're used to drinking Pepsi, they will sometimes not like the drier wines," he said.

However, if you dislike

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Visitors try a variety of wines at Chateau Chantal's tasting room on Old Mission Peninsula.

Record-Eagle/Elizabeth Conley

one type, don't assume that they're all the same.

"Just because you don't like vanilla, doesn't mean ice cream is bad," O'Keefe said.

Speaking of ice cream, Bruce Simpson, owner of Good Harbor Vineyards, said that many people make the mistake of eating excessively sweet food before coming to the tasting room.

"People will get a scoop of Superman ice cream and then say that the wine isn't sweet enough," he said.

O'Keefe echoed Simpson's warning.

"Consider what you put in your mouth before you come in ...

Mints, gum and cigarettes all distract from taste and smell of wine. (They) mask the smell, so you won't enjoy (the wine) as much ... After all, if you ate a steak

just after you had a mint, it probably wouldn't taste that good," he said.

Strong perfume and the lingering smell of cigarette smoke can ruin the tasting experience of those around you as well.

The other thing that you should not bring to the winery, according to O'Keefe, is a closed

mind.

If you consider yourself a wine expert, try to restrain yourself from imparting the whole of your knowledge to the staff at the winery or other customers.

"People who are there just to impress are usually put in their place," O'Keefe said. "If someone truly knows about wine, they are usually there to instruct people who came with them, but if people are there just to intimidate, they will usually mock the

wine and put their nose up at it before they have even tried it."

Visitors to wineries should never be afraid to ask questions. O'Keefe said they love being able to teach people more about wine and educate them.

"But there are some questions that seem to be asked for their own sake — just to be heard; sometimes you have to look at them and ask, 'Are you serious?'" he said.

O'Keefe remembered that a woman once inquired

earnestly, "How many grapes does it take to make a bottle of wine?"

"It's sort of like 'How many licks to the center of a Tootsie Pop,'" O'Keefe said. (Incidentally, he later did some calculations, and it takes about 1,208 grapes to make a bottle of wine.)

Simpson said that a surprising number of people ask what Good Harbor's cherry wine is made of. (The answer is, you guessed it, cherries.)

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