

Napa Valley **Register**

Wineries add food pairings

One way wineries are dealing with the continuing economic slowdown is to make their tasting rooms even more appealing by offering food pairing with their wine samples.

Food helps attract patrons and makes the wines taste even better.

In Italy and Spain, I've always been offered snacks like cheese, olives or charcuterie with wine samples, as the proprietors know that such savory foods make most wines tastier.

Few local wineries offered such pairings in the past, but quite a few are adding them. Some offer them at any time by appointment although most restrict the times and some make them special events once a month or less.

Just this week, for example, Robert Mondavi Winery announced new food and wine pairings, and Peju has resumed its pairings after a dry spell.

Wineries have to tread a careful line, however, as Napa's winery definition ordinance prohibits "restaurants" at wineries. They can't serve lunch, for example, though it can be served as part of a marketing event.

Étoile at Domaine Chandon is the only restaurant at a winery in Napa County (it preceded the current regulations) and also offers snacks with its wines in the tasting salon and on the patio, while V. Sattui, which was also grandfathered in, has a deli and also serves food and wine pairings.

John McDowell, the deputy planning director at the Napa County Conservation, Development and Planning Department, explains, "Food pairings/meals are an allowable form of winery marketing event, but running a restaurant and serving lunch is not an allowed use."

The visits have to be arranged in advance, and the winery operators can only conduct a limited number of these activities in accordance with the allowance set forth in their use permit.

McDowell says a typical use permit allows anywhere from a handful of such events to several dozen spaced out thorough the year — "12 events for a maximum of 20 person per event" is the way many use permits read.

And while wineries can increase their revenue with the food pairings, which typically cost \$40 or more, they cannot legally profit from conducting such events. They can only recover costs.

Some of the wineries offer tastings at dedicated tasting rooms in the county's cities, which fall under different regulations than those in the unincorporated space.

Long Meadow Ranch has a tasting room in St. Helena adjacent to its Farmstead restaurant, and has wide allowance, for example. It offers tastings seven days a week at 11 a.m. at the Logan-Ives House. Guests get small bites, created by Farmstead chef Sheamus Feeley, paired with Long Meadow Ranch olive oils and limited production wines. Advanced reservations are required. The fee is \$35 per person.

Somerston's new tasting room and Blackbird Vineyard's Ma(i)sonry in Yountville offer food with their wines, as does Patz & Hall in Napa.

Wineries that offer pairings include Cakebread, Signorello, Kuleto and Kenzo. Merryvale offers them once a month.

Most wineries avoid weekends, which are busy anyway. Kuleto has its pairings Thursday at 11:45, Cakebread Thursdays and Fridays and Mondays at 11 a.m. during the summer

Cakebread serves its pairings from chef Brian Streeter for \$40 by appointment. Its current menu includes sauvignon blanc with prawns with aioli on artichoke leaves, chardonnay with vegetable pakora with caramelized onion raita, cabernet sauvignon with endive with Point Reyes blue cheese and Port-soaked walnuts and syrah with crostini with seared lamb loin, garden beet greens and rhubarb chutney.

Signorello offers food and wine pairings with Italian treats, plus Wagyu beef, daily by appointment at 11 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. for \$65.

Peju has a wine and cheese pairing for \$40 and a wine and tapas pairing for \$60, typically at 11 a.m. Thursdays and Fridays, for a minimum of six people.

New Kenzo Estate, nestled among 4,000 acres on Mount George, has some of the most elaborate pairings, including cheese or charcuterie plates, rillettes of smoked and fresh salmon, and even a choice of sandwiches and desserts, all prepared by Thomas Keller's Bouchon restaurant in Yountville.

At the impressive new winery and tasting room designed by Howard Backen, a flight of one-ounce pours of four wines is \$30, four two-ounce pours and cheese is \$50, or with a sandwich, is \$60. The food is also available a la carte, but appointments are required.

None of these pairings can be billed as lunch, but some would certainly satisfy many visitors.

They all have another benefit: they reduce the amount of alcohol consumed on an empty stomach, which surely is a good idea.