

TASTED

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Schooldaze

In New York Chasing Wine Tasting Groups, Schools and Classes

By David Orange & Joel Leffert

We like to think of ourselves as the Winebusters!!...chasing the wonders of wine and reporting it before its time! Thinking outside the cork and just ahead of the bottle! Here was a task worthy of a Winebuster—to make sense of the Big Apple’s wine school jungle—a jammy, heady blend of old world and new, with competing aromas of blackboard and barnyard (Central Park carriage?)

It seems that almost every new wine shop holds weekly tastings these days. Then there are the famous, golden oldies from A (Acker Merrall) to Z (Kevin Zraly)—that have long calendars of classes and tastings, and have left decades of happy oenophiles in their vinous wake. Of course, there are the more formal programs for future pros at places like the International Wine Center and a slew of companies that offer a tasty combo of public classes and private parties and attract the whole range of wine devotees.

And let’s not forget those groups who frown on nasty spitting : the least formal and maybe the most fun—the social wine clubs springing up all over the city to bring people together for a nibble, a drink and a smile.

George Bernard Shaw said, “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.” But he was a teetotaler. Those who teach wine, do drink it. Check Kevin Zraly’s resume. Talk to Helio San Miguel at the Instituto Cervantes. Have a drink with John Kapon at Acker Merrall sometime. These are teachers who have been in the trenches—growing grapes, making the wine, reviewing it and selling it. It is their life’s passion. It all starts with the wine. Americans are drinking more of it than ever and we want to know what we’re buying in restaurants and stores.

Knowledge is fun. It brings new sensations. It helps us break the ice with new friends (We’ve seen total strangers at a wine class, raise a glass to sniff, lock eyes and end up toasting their own marriage!).

By giving us knowledge, stores and restaurants get us to try new things and demand our loyalty. A win/win situation. We gathered our arsenal of questions and—with parched palates and steady smiles—set out through the streets of New York, aka The Naked City. They say it has seven million stories (old census). If our past misadventures are any guide, we’ll be adding a few more.

It’s the smaller, neighborhood wine shops that are driving the growth of classes for the average consumer. When New York State allowed shops to have free in-store tastings, more formal classes soon followed. Stores aren’t schools and they don’t offer diplomas, but they can teach their clientele how to choose and enjoy what they came there to buy.

ITALIAN WINE MERCHANTS, at Union Square East, deals exclusively with Italian wines. Owner Sergio Esposito is a leading authority on them and spends three months every year traveling around Italy searching out, tasting and selecting the best bottles for his shop. Every Saturday, the shop presents “Studio Regionale” a series of tastings focused on different regions or topics such as “Italy’s Thinking Whites” or “When Points Fail.” The wines are poured by an IWM sommelier and are paired with antipasti or other regional foods.

These tastings as well as informal seminars and private and corporate events are held in the impressive Studio del Gusto or the more intimate Vintage Room. Not only has wine become larger part of American culture, but IWM feels that the wine world has been turned on its head recently.

“Wine has become immensely popular in America, while Europeans have seen a surge in beer consumption instead.” Go figure!

Italian Wine Merchants

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