

ROCHESTER BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Hands-on novices make wine their way

By ANDREA DECKERT - 3/6/2015

Ken Hall knows there are plenty of people in Upstate New York who enjoy a glass of good wine. With more wine enthusiasts showing interest in giving winemaking a try, Hall, 60, decided to give them a place to do it.

Casa Vin'Arte—which signifies house of wine and art—opened in Fairport five years ago. The business offers winemaking kits for amateur vintners to try their hand at creating their very own wine. The kits, which range in price from \$250 to \$300, have juices from all over the world, including France, Italy, Spain, Chile, New Zealand and South Africa. Customers have some 100 varietals to pick from and can even choose to make port wines.

Such stores have been popular in Canada for decades, Hall says. He honed his own winemaking skills in that country before opening his business, which has five employees.

Hall hosts wine workshops so customers can get a look at the winemaking process before they dive in. Each process begins by selecting a batch, which is then slowly coaxed into wine over six to eight weeks. Winemakers schedule five appointments over that period where they work with Casa Vin'Arte staff to create their wines.

Steps in the process include fermentation, filtration and bottling. Most batches yield 25 to 27 bottles of wine. After bottling, winemakers have the option to label their creations. There are labels provided with the juice kit, but customers also can design their own label with the help of a graphic designer who works with Hall.

The process at Casa Vin'Arte is exactly the same as what is done at a winery, only on a smaller scale, Hall says. He guarantees every batch and notes the freshness of the wines, which have fewer sulfites than commercial wines. Given the lower sulfite content, Casa Vin'Arte suggests patrons age their wine for a maximum of two years.

Hall now lives in the Buffalo area, but previously lived in Fairport. He says Casa Vin'Arte's location is a good one, due in part to the proliferation of Finger Lakes wineries as well as the local interest in wine and wine making.

The business draws customers from the Finger Lakes region and the Buffalo area. People of all ages have come in to hone their winemaking skills, Hall says. Around 90 percent of his business comes from repeat customers, who make several batches of wine each year.

Hall has hosted couples, groups of women and even business events at the store. Some of the regulars have even created their own home wine cellars after making their own batches. The business also offers advice on wine pairing.

While the type of wine chosen depends on personal taste, Hall says Barolo—a red wine from Italy—is a popular choice.

Hall, a home winemaker himself, says that Casa Vin'Arte makes it easy for novices to blend their own wines.

“Customers get to be hands-on and create the wine, and we do all the clean up,” he says.

Small Business is a biweekly feature focusing on entrepreneurs. Send suggestions for future Small Business stories to Associate Editor Smriti Jacob at sjacob@rbj.net.

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