

MONTECRISTO



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**URBAN AGRICULTURE
IN VANCOUVER**

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Custom Crush

—House Wines

RESTAURANTS IN British Columbia have had excellent relationships with the province's wineries over a long period of time. Every once in a while, a restaurant or hotel would have a private label affixed to a wine made (usually by one of the larger producers) and make that their "house pour". But an exciting new approach is firmly underway, in which a restaurant or group of restaurants will actually work with a winemaker at a winery, and come up with a unique wine, made to strenuous order, and available only at the restaurants themselves. The era of custom winemaking is begun.

The wine directors at Top Table Group, working from an idea supported by owner Jack Evrensel, began developing a custom wine program nearly three years ago. Andrea Vescovi of Blue Water Cafe and Raw Bar says, "It took a long time. It was to be a house wine made in collaboration with a winery, a different one each year. It had to work with our food programs, take our clients' tastes into account, wine that would best suit our needs." Vescovi works closely with Owen Knowlton (West), Samantha Rahn (Araxi) and Dave Merchand (CinCin; formerly with Sarah McCauley) to get it just right. Laughing Stock Vineyards was the inaugural partner,



with the team choosing certain barrels, sampling various (that means numerous) blends, and coming up with a perfect pair of wines, white and red.

Says Vescovi: "We were extremely happy with the wine. It sold out in less than eight months—frankly a surprise. We did this to show our clients there is always something new and exciting in the wine world that can show what regional and local quality are all about." The second year of the program sees a collaboration with pinot noir producer extraordinaire Foxtrot Vineyards, and chances are this wine will be gone soon, too.

David Hawksworth has somewhat similar thoughts about his collaboration with Orofino winery. "We've known Orofino for quite a long time. They are committed to quality and stewardship—things we share. The wines are made to be refreshing, easy to drink, and perfect with many of the dishes we have on the menu." Terry Threlfall, wine director and sommelier at Hawksworth, agrees. "It was a natural fit to make wines that, like our list overall, are unpretentious and approachable," he says. "Our entire sommelier team was involved." The red is 100 per cent gamay, a spicy, hugely appealing glass of wine. The white, roughly 50 per cent pinot gris and 50 per cent riesling, is, as Threlfall says, "food-friendly, with great acidity and a mid-palate burst we all found appealing."

Christine Coletta, co-owner of Okanagan Crush Pad, which makes Haywire, says, "We started this operation as a custom crush facility. There is such a huge need for it. Our own wines, and wines we make for anyone else, are all about Okanagan specificity, even above varietal correctness, in a sense." After many years of working on a project-by-project basis with chef Rob Feenie, Coletta and her team began collaborating with Cactus Club Cafe on a wine. It's called Feenie Goes Haywire.

Service director Sebastien Le Goff, together with bar manager Sam Zavari, spent a lot of time tasting alongside Okanagan Crush Pad winemaker Michael Bartier. "When it came down to the final blends," says Le Goff, "I had in mind that the white should match perfectly with Rob's ravioli dish, and the red with the short rib sandwich, but I don't think of these as strictly food wines." The wines are aromatic and have lift, particularly the white with its lovely peach and apricot notes, and a hint of sage. But both the red and the white are lovely sipping wines, and a superb way to get the meal going.

These custom label wines bear the hallmarks of attention to detail, and a passion for bringing the best of the region to consumers in a new way. Try a glass soon, but be prepared: one will likely not be enough.

—Jim Tobler