



AN OPEN WINDOWS FOR WORLD WINES

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Food

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Clubs Help Small Vintners Find Customers Eager for New Tastes

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Just after John Kerry's 2004 defeat, Michael Evans — a D.C. native and longtime campaign worker for Democratic presidential candidates — took succor in the bucolic wine country of Mendoza, Argentina.

Evans and friend David Garrett, a Web site developer, had planned on vacationing in Argentina for three weeks. Instead, they moved there permanently to establish a tasting room and wine-shipping business with an Argentine business partner, Pablo Gimenez.

Evans' decision to channel boutique Argentine wines to North American and European consumers through a wine club ("You just can't get good, interesting Argentinian wines in the U.S.," he said) is part of a larger trend. Smaller wineries are discovering they have better luck shipping their products straight to consumers than seeking out a national distributor, a strategy that allows them to appeal directly to their target audience.

California "micro wineries" — operations that produce fewer than 5,000 cases a year — now sell 40 percent of their wines through direct sales, according to a 2004 study by wine-consulting firm MKF Research. Small wineries in the state that produce less than 50,000 cases sell 31 percent of their wine the same way, compared with 1.7 percent of California's biggest wineries.

Not all U.S. residents can take advantage of such sales: Out-of-state wineries can ship to Virginia and the District without a problem, but Maryland remains off-limits. But for those who can order directly from wineries, these clubs provide a convenient way to sample high-quality wines from the United States and overseas.

Vintner's Collective (www.vintnerscollective.com) ships wines from 17 Napa Valley wineries to customers every quarter. Owner Garret Murphy said boutique wineries are beginning to catch up with larger operations through wine clubs like his own.

"It's a great way for the little California producers to get their wine out there consistently," said Murphy, whose members include Judd's Hill and Ancien Wines. "For the consumer, they get boutique wines they can't get at home."

Like many wine clubs, the Vintner's Collective has two tiers of membership. For roughly \$150 a shipment, Connoisseur Club members receive four bottles five times a year. (Tax and shipping costs vary depending on the state.) Collector Club members pay about \$330 a shipment for eight bottles five times a year.

Although French wine producers do not face the same challenge getting into U.S. stores as some small Napa labels, a few outfits also offer ways to order from smaller French vineyards. Through his Web site, www.frenchwinegift.com, Californian Michael Boucher offers a package of two French wines (two reds, two whites or one of each), letters describing the wines, a map of the region and a card, all for \$48.75. The price drops if you order in volume: Buy two bottles a month for a year, and each order costs \$43.89.

Closer to home, a \$75 annual membership in D.C.'s French Wine Society (www.frenchwinesociety.org) gets you a 10 percent discount on French wine in several local stores, special offers at French restaurants and tickets to periodic French wine tastings in town.

The Vines of Mendoza (www.vinesofmendoza.com), which Evans, Garrett and Gimenez opened last March, can offer even cheaper prices, given the current exchange rate with the Argentine peso. Its Acequia Wine Club sends out six bottles to members four times a year for \$120 per shipment, including tax and shipping. Its Acequia Reserve Wine Club charges \$220 a quarter for shipments of four to six bottles.

"Our preference, for the most part, is for small boutique wines that don't have distribution," Evans said.

I discovered Vines of Mendoza on a vacation last fall with a couple of friends, one of them a true —



though endearing — wine snob. I had already endured one semi-disastrous vacation in California wine country with a haughty companion (a European who frowned upon Anderson Valley's offerings), and I did not want to make the same mistake.

But my friend Dante, who sampled 15 wines with me and our friend Randy during a pre-lunch tasting at Vines of Mendoza in November, became a convert to Argentine wine in the end. He hadn't been a fan of the Argentine malbecs he had tasted in the United States but said, "clearly they're just keeping all the good wine in Argentina."

He's on to something: Until the 1990s, less than 2 percent of Argentine wine made it out of the country, Gimenez said, and even now only 15 percent of the nation's wine is exported. Gimenez, whose family has been growing grapes in Mendoza for 60 years and making wine for more than half a century, said his country's vintages have become more sophisticated in recent years.

"There's been a big change from table wine to wine that's very good," he said.

In fact, the wines we tasted in Mendoza far surpassed the serviceable but uninspiring malbecs usually proffered at Washington cocktail parties. Our favorites included



Above, Vines of Mendoza business partners Michael Evans, from left, Pablo Gimenez and David Garrett at Pulenta Estate vineyard; top, the vineyard sits near the base of the Andes Mountains in Alto Agrelo, Mendoza, Argentina.

Vistalba Corte B, a rich blend of cabernet, merlot, malbec and bonarda that has notes of fig and berries; Carmelo Patti Cabernet Sauvignon 2002, an earthy but smooth wine; and Enrique Foster Reserva 2003, another lush wine

with strong berry notes and a bit of spice.

In addition to shipping wine and operating a tasting room, Vines of Mendoza arranges free vineyard tours in the area. The club can also book a driver for a day-long tour at

a cost of roughly \$60; a three-course lunch at one of the wineries' excellent restaurants runs about \$30 per person, including wine, tax and tip.

And for particularly wealthy customers, Evans and his partners are building a luxury wine resort and a vanity vineyard operation, where foreigners can buy parcels of two to 12 acres. Vines of Mendoza will provide three years of free vineyard maintenance, planting grapes according to a customer's wishes and providing a bottling operation on hand once the grapes ripen. Most vineyard owners will be able to offset the cost of bottling 100 cases of wine a year by selling 85 percent of the grapes on their land to other wine producers.

"They'll never have to open their checkbook again," Garrett said. Of course, customers have to open their checkbooks at first to buy the land, at \$40,000 per acre.

Ordinary mortals can rely on wine clubs in the meantime. And Evans, who came back to the United States in November to see his party retake control of Congress, said he's open to returning to Washington eventually — on the coattails, he hopes, of a Democrat.

If that happens, you can bet he will celebrate with a nice bottle of malbec.