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HOUSE WINE

Have a party to remember in your own tasting room

Jessica Yadegaran
Times Staff Writer

The only things missing from the Plutts' living room were spit buckets and fanny packs. Otherwise, wine country came to them.

In the comfort of their Moraga home, where onion puffs do their final caramelizing in the oven, nine couples swirl, sniff and sip their way through six wines. Just like in a tasting room, talk at this wine party drifts from vintages and backyard vines to church and preschool.

And just like in a tasting room, the wine educator brings everyone back to the glass.

"This is almost the last time I'm going to break up your party," yells Scott Bigelow, a consultant with WineShop at Home, above the chatter.

Yes, tastings just got a little cozier. And just in time for holiday party planning. Save your gas money, forget the limo and don't bother sending that Evite. A la Pampered Chef, wine companies and sommeliers now bring the wine party to you. A little or a lot of party — that part's up to you.

The Plutts, Steven and Heather, stuck to the basics. They're wine people; Heather used to work for Gallo, Steven proudly displays his \$500 aroma kit, Le Nez du Vin, on the kitchen table. But organizing a wine party — buying the wines, creating tasting cards, cooking to pair — much less leading a tasting, was too much work.

"I'm busy. I have three kids. Plus, Scott is on the cutting edge," says Heather Mindel-Plutt.

It's true. Bigelow is one of 1,000 consultants who works for the San Ramon-based WineShop at Home. The company specializes in affordable, limited-production California wines. Your job: Invite friends, and provide the food and glasses. The consultant's job: Bring the knowledge and one of three wine samplers.

The wines change often, so if you have a tasting at Christmas, by Valentine's Day, half the sampler will be new wines. And yes, you can buy after you try.

Early on, Bigelow walks the group, timid and all-too-polite, through a 2001 Italian tocai friulano, the brother of sauvignon blanc. He tells them to stick their nose in the glass. They do. Everyone is standing, and they exchange nods of approval over this new grape.

"This is fun," says Jim Babson of Moraga, who recently helped his father-in-law, a member of the Lamorinda WineGrowers Association, pick pinot grapes on his home vineyard. "It forces you to try new varietals."

By 8 p.m., it's syrah time. The 2000 Havens has spawned a debate over jammy versus peppery, and a guest eschews the tapenade pairing for a sausage pastry. In one corner, Brion Donlon of Moraga, whose 900-bottle cellar houses many a Carneros pinot, jokes that chardonnay is the reason he has children. In another, Bigelow drops gold medal talk on a small but interested group.

The party is officially on.

The theme party

Erica Post of San Francisco threw her Saints and Sinners wine tasting party with help from Courtney Cochran, of Your Personal Sommelier. It was Valentine's Day, and the idea was to pit the light, saintly whites against the big, devilish reds.

Cochran, who is 27 and divas larger parties in San Francisco under the name Hip Tastes, helped Post plan the menu for the guided potluck: a verdicchio with Heavenly Chicken Sausage and Grapes; a Water Wheel red blend with Thyme to Kill Mustard-Thyme Lamb Chops. They sought out red and black labels, of course.

"I'm a theme person," admits Post, an MBA grad who works at Oracle. She held the party with her husband, Dana, in their one-bedroom Pacific Heights apartment.

The Posts know what they like. High-value reds. The bigger, the better. So Erica brought Cochran in to challenge their palates, she says. Her guests were appreciative.

"Everyone is comfortable drinking California wines, so she introduced us to vermentino and verdicchio," Erica says. "At first, I think everyone was surprised that Courtney was there. She was almost the entertainment for the evening. But by the end of the night, she was more. She ended up being the interesting friend at the party."

Cochran introduced each wine and explained the food pairing, then let the guests gab for a bit.

"Then I 'ding, ding, ding,' bring them back," says Cochran, whose parties range from 30th birthdays and anniversaries to Cisco team-builders. A 50th birthday for a prominent Bel Air man called for Dom Perignon and Chateauneuf du Pape.

But the Posts, like most of her clients, wanted to learn something new, so Cochran's esoteric recommendations of underappreciated French Alsace and Spanish Bierzo wines came in handy.

"I bring in an extra dimension of expertise that a lot of guests who are really educated and world-traveled still may not have," she says.

The Bordeaux blitz

Leslie Morris of Danville wanted to do something special for her husband's 40th birthday. With a cellar brimming with California cabernets, she settled on a Bordeaux tasting.

Rick & Ann's catered with crudites and filet mignon sandwiches. Cochran presented Chateau Carbonnieux Pessac-Leognan against Aia Miner Family Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon. The guests loved it.

More formal than the Valentine's Day potluck, Cochran uncorked the wines and servers poured. She spent 10 minutes on each wine, talking about the nuances and differences. While it sounds like Judgment of Paris en Danville, it was really just a dinner party — improved.

"The tasting gave people something to talk about besides 'shop,'" Morris recalls. "It's not often that you can throw a party and people can learn something."

Jessica Yadegaran is a lifestyle writer for the Times. Reach her at jjadegaran@cctimes.com or read her wine blog, Corkheads, at <http://blogs.contracostatimes.com/corkheads>.

Where's the Party?

Apparently, it's at your house. Bring the tasting room to you with help from these companies. Or contact your favorite restaurant and ask for the sommelier. They'd be flattered. Some could use the extra cash.

WineShop at Home. San Ramon-based wine company that brings the wine and the wine educator, tasting notes and food pairing suggestions to you. Choose from three California samplers. You provide the food and the glasses. Includes wine club options, customized labels and rewards for hosting. \$59. 800-946-3746; www.wineshopathome.com.

Your Personal Sommelier. Wine consultant-sommelier Courtney Cochran helps you select wines to meet your theme and foods to pair, and works with caterers. Pre-planned parties include Pinot or Bust!; The Misfits: Port, Sherry and Madeira; and Getting to Know Merlot — All Over Again. Rates are hourly. 415-814-2908; www.courtneycochran.com.

THE HIT OF THE PARTY

Tons of party-goers drinking dozens of wines? The least we can do is tell you the favorite wine at each party:

The Plutts: Of the three whites and three reds, all from California, the overwhelming consensus was the Monte Volpe 2001 Tocai Fruilano. A crisp and crunchy Mendocino white when you tire of sauvignon blanc. \$11.50.

The Posts: Of the two Italian whites and four reds, the Post party favored the 2003 Michael-David 7 Deadly Zins Lodi Zinfandel. The supple pepper was the perfect pair for California Pizza Kitchen's BBQ Chicken Pizza. \$12.99.

The Morris: Of the three wines, a California cabernet and two French Bordeaux, the talker of the night was the well-balanced 1996 Chateau Carbonnieux Pessac-Leognan. About \$30.