



Features

Urban vintners in Inland area open DIY method to customers

05:11 PM PDT on Monday, June 4, 2007

By LAURIE LUCAS
The Press-Enterprise

While two women sip wines at the tasting bar, owner Kevin Craig customizes a label on his computer for a bottle of peach splash chardonnay.

It says: "To Ms. Joanna Molo: A Great Friend, Mentor & Teacher."

Customer Irish Belisario, 23, a graduate-school student at UC Riverside, designed it for the \$12.93 bottle of wine she bought as a gift. She and her sister, Jo Jo Belisario, 21, who also attends UCR, promised they'd be back to pick out a wine for Father's Day.

"It's so convenient," says Irish. "And we love the personalized labels."

They've discovered Kevin and Carolyn Craig's Winery, officially known as the American Eagle Wine Making Company Winery at Canyon Crest in Riverside.

Tucked between Rite-Aid and Merle Norman Cosmetics in the Towne Centre, the former furniture store now exudes the sweet aroma of fermenting grape juice.

Story continues below



Steven Lewis / Special to The Press-Enterprise
Owner Kevin Craig speaks with customer Sherri Plaxco, of San Marcos, at the newly opened Winery at Canyon Crest in Riverside.

Three weeks ago, the Craigs opened a franchise, joining a boomlet in boutique wineries. Often downtown or in strip malls, these urban wineries are vineyard-free, but they enable clients to taste, buy, design and bottle wines made on-site. The winery owners either purchase and crush the grapes, or, like the Craigs, buy the unfermented juice, called "must."

The Craigs, Indiana transplants, moved to Riverside four years ago for Carolyn's teaching job in accounting at UCR. Things didn't work out as planned. She bounced around at several colleges. Kevin was laid off from his job in human resources at a large company.

At a wine festival last year, they met Wine Not International franchisers Ken and Angela Lineberger, owners of The Wine Tailor in Rancho Cucamonga.

"We love being winemakers without being farmers," says Ken. Since their winery debuted in 2004, they've been swamped with business. "Guests love making their own vintage and the customized labels," he explains.

The parent company, Wine Not International, based in Ontario, Canada, plans on adding as many as 10 more franchises by the end of 2008 to the current eight in the U.S., Ken says. "They've created a new way for people to get involved with wine, bringing it to the masses."

Story continues below



Steven Lewis / Special to The Press-Enterprise
A selection of white wines is on display at the newly opened
Winery at Canyon Crest in Riverside.

Hands-on participation is part of the new fascination with wine, says Peter Marks, director of wine and food at Copia: The American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts in Napa. "People want to get closer to the actual production and be an artist."

The Craigs decided to pop the cork and launch their own Wine Not business to tap into the country's booming \$25 billion wine industry.

"We've always enjoyed entertaining," says Kevin, 56. "When we found the opportunity to open a winery, we thought it would be like having a wine-tasting party every day."

Carolyn, 57, a gourmet cook, is savvy at pairing food with wine. "I came by it honest," she says. "I grew

up on a farm where my grandpa grew grapes and made wine."

The couple invested more than \$150,000 buying the franchise and transforming the 1,900-square-foot Godeaux furniture store into an intimate winery with trompe l'oeil art, furnishings and a tasting bar.

For \$5, customers sit at the granite-topped counter or at lounge tables, nibble fresh strawberries, and sample an ounce apiece of five wines or sip 5 ounces of one variety.

In the backroom, the Craigs blend, customize, ferment, rack, fine and filter the juice, a five- to seven-week process. They sell 17 varieties that cost between \$10 for a white zinfandel and \$22 for a specialty wine; a half-batch, 14 bottles, runs from \$99 to \$149; and a full batch, 29 bottles, \$199 to \$324. The prices include the bottles, corks, shrink caps and a standard label that clients design. They can save 30 percent if they bottle their own vintage in the store.

Clients are beginning to book bottling parties. "We do all the messy work," says Carolyn Craig. "They have all the fun."

Gloria Tafesh already is a fan. "Their wines are awesome," she says of the two cases she served at an open house at Sunrise Senior Living where she's director of community services. "I'm going to keep ordering the fruit wines for happy hours. There isn't as much alcohol in them." They contain 7.7 percent versus the usual 12 percent to 14 percent, Carolyn Craig notes.

On a recent day, Daren Gottlieb, 21, a UCR student, picks up seven \$13 bottles of cabernet merlot to present at a formal dinner in Las Vegas to graduating fraternity brothers of Phi Kappa Sigma.

Kevin Craig made personalized labels with their names and the fraternity's black-and-gold crested design.

Gottlieb is thrilled. "You worked your magic," he tells Kevin Craig. "This is perfect."

Reach Laurie Lucas at llucas@PE.com or 951-368-9569.

The IE's Urban Wineries:

American Eagle Wine Making Co.

Winery at Canyon Crest

Owners: Kevin and Carolyn Craig

5255 Canyon Crest Drive, 7A

Riverside

951-369-WINE (9463)

www.americaneagleriverside.com

The Wine Tailor

Owners: Ken and Angela Lineberger

8916 Foothill Boulevard, Suite K3

Rancho Cucamonga

909-481-5050

www.thewinetaylor.com
