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Local winery works to make wine 'accessible,' fun for all

By KIRK DICKEY Wednesday, January 31, 2007 11:50 AM CST

News Editor

Oak barrels line one counter and the sun glints off of the blue, green, gold and red bottles in the windows of The Winery in Grand Prairie as owner Rick Sala talks about the growth of his business and the wine industry in general.

The market, he says, is moving away from beer and into wine. There has been an upturn in high-end wine purchases by African-American and Hispanic customers in a market long-dominated by whites. And young people are

discovering and enjoying different types of wine without the constraints placed on them by purists.

And all of that is good news to Sala, who shucked a job in manufacturing in April 2005 to open the winery, located at 3803 Robinson Road. Sala says that he considers his operation a different type of manufacturing, "a unique opportunity to actually make a product that people want to buy."

Starting out

"I was tired of the big corporate game and was looking to do something different," Sala said. "This was just a chance to take everything that I learned in the manufacturing industry and apply it on a micro scale."

With 18 years of manufacturing experience a wife who is an industrial engineer and winery manager Anush Gharibyan, who has a wine making degree equivalent to an agricultural engineering degree, the winery has doubled its volume since opening while reducing its workforce from six to four.

"We take all of that expertise and (try to figure out) 'How can we do more with less' constantly," Sala said.

The attention to detail has paid off. Sala planned this week to announce plans to double the production capacity in Grand Prairie and open a second location in Arlington under the name "American Eagle Winemaking Company."

The Grand Prairie winery and the new one opening in Arlington are both based on the Wine Not business model, a company based in Canada. The winery imports juices from countries and wine-producing regions from around the world.

"We just pick the region we want to buy from," he said. "We have stuff in here from Chili, Argentina, France, Germany, Italy, California, Washington state, Canada ..."

Sala said the process is similar to a lot of the boutique wineries in places known for their wines, in Napa Valley for instance, which do not have their own vinyards. They buy grapes from surrounding vinyards and crush them. Others just buy juice.

"We are just picking the process from which the grapes have been crushed," he said.

The wines, though, are made on site. Three large specially-made tanks sit in a large room on the northern end of the building. Specialized water jackets keep the wine fermenting at the right temperature and allow the wine technicians to keep a close eye on the process.

Fermentation lasts for about a week, before the wine is transferred to another tank and other elements are added to sweeten or preserve the wine. The wine is then held for "clarifying" and



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allowing particulates from the process to settle at the bottom.

Depending on the type of wine, it may be aged. Although the oakiness of the wine is added in the tanks, it may be barrel-aged as well.

The process yields up to 250 unique wines, with names like Amore', Blackberry kiss and First Frost.

The house specialty

The most popular wines made in Grand Prairie are the "fruit-kissed" wines.

"We can't keep up with (demand), as much as we try," Sala said.

Sweet with the essence of raspberry, apple, cranberry, or the above mentioned blackberry, these wines have become popular with the younger crowd and especially people who do not normally drink wine.

"People love them," Sala said. "They become fanatics for them.

"I've got regulars who come in and are looking for their specific (wine) ... and if we don't have it, sometimes they get pretty mad."

But the most unique thing about the winery is the opportunity for customers to make their own wines.

For between \$235 and \$399, depending on the base wine, a customer can be fully involved in the winemaking process, adding flavors and oakiness and come away with a batch of 28 bottles of their own custom wine. The winery recently introduced a half-batch of 14 bottles.

"It's a very special event, because people get to participate in (making) the wine," Gharibyan said. "A lot of people are intimidated by (making) wine. They think it is a very upscale thing that is not available for an average person."

But that is not true. The winery wants to open the process up to as many people as possible. And that goes well with Sala's philosophy on wine.

Accessibility

The joy of wine should be available to anyone who wants it, according to Sala.

"There are a lot of people who can be very pretentious about wine and that can be very disconcerting to other people," he said.

Sometimes people act almost embarrassed that they do not know more about wine when they come into the winery. But that is not what wine should be about, according to Sala.

"There are the 'iron-clad rules (for wines with foods),' but you don't have to live by the iron-clad rules," he said. "Wine should be fun. It shouldn't be something you are going to stress out over."

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