



Wines, Vines and Our Economic Times

After the cancellation of Cabrillo's wine education classes, instructor Sue Slater makes the case for learning more about what's in the bottle

BY JESSI HAMEL Local wine expert Sue Slater believes wine will improve your life.

As she energetically articulates her case for the importance of wine—tasting it, knowing about it, sharing it—she evokes an attorney passionately defending a client who has been wrongly accused.

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"Wine is a food group in most European countries," Slater says. "But here it's viewed as a vice instead of something that will enhance your life and your experience."

It is understandable that Slater is feeling the need to defend her passion. Recent budget difficulties at Cabrillo College have led administrators to cut Slater's wine education classes from the culinary arts program as part of a broader attempt to close an anticipated \$5 million budget gap.

Slater initiated these classes 11 years ago when she realized her culinary arts students knew almost nothing about wine. "They didn't know how to open a bottle," she says.

Slater feels that the general public is equally as woefully misinformed about wine. She says that for most people a wine list at a restaurant might as well be a "trigonometry test."

In her classes, Slater helped her students learn about the different elements that influence the taste of wine, including the geography, politics, and climate of the different wine regions. After a lecture, her students sample wines and discuss the reasons, say, a zinfandel from the Sierra Foothills might taste different from a zinfandel from Paso Robles. "People sign up for classes thinking they're going to swirl a merlot after work, talk about the lovely bouquet, and then go home and have their TV dinners," Slater says. "But I try to warn them that it really is academic."

Slater's goal for her students was for them to be able to look at the label on a bottle of wine and have a solid understanding of what's in the bottle.

According to Slater, this knowledge will not only improve their dining experiences—by being able to predict which wine will go best with the food they are eating—but also can lead to real economic benefits. She reports that those who have taken her classes are "snatched up" by local restaurants because few in the industry can speak confidently about wine. Students of hers who work as servers boast of higher tips from being able to recommend a good wine to go with each meal.

And then there are the lifers: students of hers who have turned wine into their vocation.

After taking Slater's classes in 2006 and 2007, Katie Vandermause left her job in press relations for the NFL to work for a small, family-owned vineyard in Napa. She now works for Consellation Wineries—

one of the largest wine distributors in the United States. "I worked in the NFL for eight or nine years and loved it, but I don't think I'll go back," she says. "The wine world is really exciting and there is always something to learn."

Mikael Wargin took his first class with Slater in 2004. A biochemistry student from UC Santa Cruz, Wargin was working as a landscaper when he became interested in viniculture. Today he works fulltime for MJA Vineyards, a local Santa Cruz winery. He's also started his own label, an Italian Blend called "Big and Beautiful."

"It's a good time," Wargin says of his job. "It's sun, it's clean air, it's good food. I've got a joke: If you've got to make money, do this. If you don't, then stay home and drink wine."

Many current Cabrillo students are upset at the class cancellations. "It's really disappointing because those classes correlate greatly with the culinary arts program," says culinary arts student Erica Tovar, who now is looking for wine classes to take outside of Cabrillo.

Cabrillo College president Brian King is sympathetic, but points out that cuts have been made to classes in every program the college offers. "We understand that the classes that we're forced to eliminate are classes about which people have passions," King says. "The students are bearing the brunt of the problems in Sacramento and the inability to locate the revenues our state needs."

In these tough economic times, it is understandable how some might see wine as frivolous, though Slater insists that these times are exactly when we may need a reminder to relax and enjoy a glass.

"We're doing too much and we're running too fast," she says. "We don't sit down and eat with each other anymore. And if you have a bottle of wine, maybe you'll sit down and the bottle of wine on the table is going to lengthen the meal. It's going to enhance the meal. And maybe we'll talk to each other more."

Sue Slater recommends three local wineries to jump-start your wine education: Odonata Wines at odonatawines.com, Storrs Winery at storrswine.com, and Windy Oaks at windyoakes-tate.com. ☺