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.

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 viticulture. 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 windyoaksestate.com.