

NPR – MORNING EDITION

NPR's John McChesney reports

Air Date: November 22, 2004

Wine Tasting Takes a High-Tech Turn

Most winemakers use very sophisticated technology, but they don't like to talk about it. That might tarnish the industry's cherished public image as the custodian of a natural and mysterious process. But now a wine retailer is putting high-tech up front as a way to sell wine in San Francisco. NPR's John McChesney visited VinoVenue – a fully automated wine bar.

Located in the heart of the city, VinoVenue sports a colorful, modern décor where redwood cabinets set off the stainless steel wine racks lining the walls, and carousels are scattered across the floor. At the cash register James Frisby is selling a purple smartcard to Jerry Canal. (instructions from James regarding layout of wine carousels) Jerry Canal eagerly casts his eye over the hundred-or-so bottles of wine available for tasting. "This is amazing. We love wine and this is like being a kid in a candy shop, here." Canal can take a smartcard over to one of the carousels, stick it in a slot and punch a button for an ounce of the wine he chooses.

VinoVenue is the brainchild of Mary Lynn Slattery and Nancy Rowland – refugees from marketing and investing firms. "Nancy and I were on vacation in Europe and we came across this concept and we were looking for something new and saw it and said 'oh my god this would be great in the US.'"

This technology didn't migrate up from Silicon Valley, south of San Francisco as you might expect. Rowland and Slattery found it in the old world – Italy – to be exact. A traditional wine bar will usually pour, at most, a couple dozen varieties of wine, instead of the hundred-or-so found here. Nancy Rowland explains how VinoVenue does it.

"It's very difficult for another retail establishment to open that many wines without having them go bad. All of our wines are argon-infused, which is an inert, colorless, and tasteless, and it allows us to keep the wines at the same level as when they were just opened."

The automated system will also signal the central computer system when a bottle is empty. And the smartcard stores data on what you've tasted, so if you forget the name of a wine you liked, the store can look it up. Slattery takes me over to the Pinot Noir carousel for a demonstration.

"The good thing about sort of the Pinot Noir station is that you can taste and compare pinots from different regions...(she gives examples)."

There were 40 or 50 customers in VinoVenue when we were there and we expected to find some who were put off by the intrusion of technology into the sacred world of wine. We didn't. Martin Wan, visiting from Connecticut, is representative of the crowd's enthusiasm.

"Great Idea. To be able to try these wines in small pours as a taste before you buy...I think they've got a winner." Connie George, who's been here several times, loves to compare wines from different countries. "And how much money do you have on your card? Ooo...oh, almost \$40." "I better get going here."

Of course, forty bucks won't take you very far if you get drawn into the Velvet Room where one of the wines costs \$28 for the ounce. On the other hand, it may be the only shot you have at finding out what a \$200 bottle of wine tastes like. A few customers here said they would like to have more information than the brief descriptions on the cards above each bottle.

Not far from here, Peter Granoff – one of the Bay Area's foremost wine authorities – offers that kind of advice at his more traditional Ferry Plaza wine bar. But he welcomes this new effort. "Its downside is that there isn't a lot of help at the retail shelf and that's probably the missing piece for me. I think there's a real place for what they're doing and I think there is potentially a very interested audience, but our business is much more hands-on, much more interactive with our customers." But, Granoff says this technology is right for franchising in areas of the country where wine expertise is not as plentiful as it is in the San Francisco area. And Slattery and Rowland couldn't agree more. They're already exploring ways to branch out.