

Wine in kegs new market for Napa wineries

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Paul Franson Napa Valley Register | Posted: Thursday, June 16, 2011 10:07 pm | (0) Comments

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A new trend is opening up a new market for a few Napa Valley wineries: Wine in kegs.

The Kitchen Door restaurant that opened this week in the Oxbow Public Market, is only the latest local eatery adopting a very old idea: Serving from a keg.

In the old days, of course, it was from a wood — barrel, but drawing wine from a barrel — even a small one — leads to oxidation and worse.

Now, restaurants mostly use small 20-liter stainless steel containers similar to those used for soda syrup — sometimes beer kegs — and the wine is both protected and propelled by a neutral gas like nitrogen or argon (not carbon dioxide like sodas, as that would carbonate it).

In other parts of the U.S., it's been common to see casual restaurants selling wine from 20-liter boxes, big brothers to those sold in supermarkets. That's been rare in wine country, however, partly because the wine is typically low end.

However, a number of restaurants in Napa Valley have dispensed wine from kegs, including are Farmstead, Fish Story, Cuvée, Silverado Brewing Co., Hurley's and the restaurant at the Culinary Institute.

Oxbow Wine Merchant once offered tap wine, but switched because of demand for craft beer.

Many restaurants in the Bay Area have jumped on the bandwagon, too.

Wine in kegs has many advantages, including cost and environmental benefits:

• Reduced packaging costs

• Potential reduced cost to the customer

• No TCA ("corked" wines)

• Low oxidation and spoilage

• Lower shipping weight

• Reduced carbon shipping footprint

• No waste at the end of a bottle

A few companies have sprung up to supply the demand, though filling the kegs can be done at a winery.

One company is Free Flow Wines with its Silvertap brand in Sonoma. Another is Mas Winery Company of Cloverdale, which uses proprietary 11- and 15-liter kegs.

Vintap was formed by Michael Ouellette, who both brokers and distributes kegs. He doesn't have a Vintap brand, though he has some 'house' brands he can use if a conflict with a distributor selling bottled wines arises.

One issue seems to be whether restaurants want to use the kegs to offer low-priced wine — an obvious choice — or special unique wines. At Kitchen Door, you can get a glass for $7 or half-liter for $15 ($5 per glass, a bargain for a Napa Valley restaurant) while Fish Story seems to lean toward the hard-to-find wines.

Ouellette doesn't want keg wines to be stereotyped at the low end of the market, as has happened to some degree with screw-capped wines.

A well-known sommelier and restaurateur, Ouellette says he looks for the same type of wines he sought for wine lists: varietal wines of interest such as estate wines.

He's focusing on the West Coast due to logistics issues, like returning the kegs, but he's looking into a recyclable (not reusable) keg for the eastern markets.

It's still green, Ouellette notes: "It saves the packaging and weight of 26 bottles." He adds that by the end of the year, he will have 1,400 stainless steel kegs in play.

Ouellette says some wineries fill their own kegs and others have him fill them. "If we distribute the wine, we buy it and fill the keg. If we broker it, we don't buy the wine."

Among the winemakers and wineries that have supplied kegs are Jim Moore (L'Uvaggio), Saintsbury, Emilio's Terrace, Saddleback, Peter Franus, Hudson Vineyards, Rutherford Hill, Steltzner, Oakville Ranch, Von Strasser, Benessere and Chimney Rock.

A few wineries like Long Meadow Ranch and Saddleback are selling the kegs themselves. Long Meadow supplies its own Farmstead and other restaurants.

Other wineries have taken another approach, supplying wine in a collapsible bladder; Boisset's DeLoach and Raymond brands hide a bag of red wine inside an ornamental wooden cask.

Kegs are ideal for "locavores," and the logistics to distribute them around the country and return them for cleaning and refilling seems likely to discourage widespread adoption.

But for those of us here in wine country, it's another way to enjoy local wine — and for wineries to distribute their products.

Wine Industry Technology Symposium

The seventh annual Wine Industry Technology Symposium will be July 12-13 at the Napa Valley Marriott.

It's a must for anyone managing computer and information technology in the wine business. Get information and register at wineindustrytechnologysymposium.com.

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