



How Pay-Per-Taste Technology Is Democratizing Wine Tasting

Not only do self-serve wine dispensers lack implicit bias, they also make rare wines more widely available

by [Maria C. Hunt](#) | Nov 16, 2021, 9:31am PST

A bottle of the Harlan family's [Promontory](#), one of Napa Valley's new generation of cult cabs, sells for \$1,000 and up — if you have the connections and patience to even find a bottle of the highly allocated wine. But at [the Oakville Wine Merchant](#), a chic wine retailer in Napa Valley, anyone over 21 can pay \$47 for a one-ounce taste. It's just one of the selections on the 100-point wine wall, which automatically dispenses servings of wines that have received perfect scores from critics, along with rare cabernet sauvignons including [Harbison Estate](#), [Hundred Acre](#), and [Bond's Vecina](#). Last year, it was selling \$65 tastes of the Flight by [Screaming Eagle](#), the ne plus ultra of Napa Valley cult wineries. With the swipe of a card, visitors can taste wines starting at \$3 from a dozen Wine Stations focused on key Napa Valley wine regions.

Cab lovers are flocking to the Oakville machine, which is currently pouring wines by [Opus One](#), [Ovid](#), the [Mascot](#), and the [Debate](#). "I joke it's the adult candy store," says Ashley Ogburn, the tasting room manager. "You could sit here for five minutes or five hours and taste all across Napa Valley."

With wine vending machines, visitors scan selections, swipe a charge card, and hold their glass under a spout that dispenses either a taste, half-glass, or full glass, eliminating the need to be served by a member of the staff. When new technology takes over a job once done by humans, it's usually seen as a negative development. But there may be upsides to automatic wine-pouring machines like [Enomatic](#) and the Wine Station, one of the biggest being its potential to democratize the wine-tasting experience.

"The idea was to open up access to wines and tasting rooms that are difficult to get into," says Jean-Charles Boisset, owner of Oakville Wine Merchant. "Instead of paying \$600 for a bottle, you can have a taste for \$60." He also installed the automatic wine dispensers in his Raymond Vineyards tasting room and his Ink House luxury inn, both in St. Helena.

Pay-per-taste wine servers are showing up across Sonoma and Napa wine country, at retailers including [Gary's Wine & Marketplace](#), in tasting rooms, and at high-end restaurants, and they're making wine and wine tasting more accessible — if not always entirely affordable. While sommeliers can help guide people to wines they'll enjoy, bias can creep into the process, turning them into gatekeepers. This technology removes that implicit bias and allows wine consumers to serve themselves anything they like.

People have a lot of stress around wine tasting, says Nick Moezidis, CEO of [Napa Technology](#), which makes the popular Wine Station. Surveys told them that some people loved drinking wine, but not choosing it. “The most horrendous thing that could happen is you’re on a wonderful date, then the sommelier comes up and they choke,” Moezidis says. “A self-serve option lets people skip the embarrassment, have fun trying different wines, and discover what they like.” Since launching the paid wine dispenser in technology in 2005, Moezidis said more than 12,000 customers in 40 countries have installed Wine Stations in nail salons, country clubs, and even a couple of U.S. Air Force officer clubs.

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As chef Dustin Valette and his team were planning the [Matheson](#) — his [multilevel Healdsburg dining destination](#) with fine farm-to-table cuisine, sushi, and a casual roof deck — they made room for an entire wall of self-service wine dispensers. The 88 Wine Stations pour everything from big names like [Vérité](#) and famed sweet wine [Château d’Yquem sauternes](#) to small discovery wines and sake that complements Ken Tominaga’s sushi. Valette is proud they’re introducing diners to Sonoma gems like [Devil Proof](#), which Robert Parker called the best California malbecs he’s ever tasted, and Sam [Lando’s pinot noirs](#).

Jon McCarthy, the Matheson beverage director, says the wall is a low-key way for people to explore — and learn about — new wines. “I think there’s a little pressure when you’re in a traditional tasting room to know a little bit about what you’re talking about, or do a little bit of a performative thing with your friends,” he says. In October, the customer favorite was a Sancerre by Le Roi des Pierres, while they netted the most revenue with [Cirq](#), the solo pinot noir label from Michael Browne, who became famous with his sought-after Kosta Browne pinot noirs. McCarthy said the wall helps sommeliers move bottles of somewhat obscure wines, like Kerner or Silvaner, since diners can try a taste before committing to the bottle.

Machines are also a low-pressure way of tasting wine, says Kerry Thedorf, co-founder of [Region](#). The inviting, light-filled Sonoma-focused tasting room in the Barlow offers both self-serve wine dispensers and traditional counter service. “It’s a convenience to be able to choose what they want when they want,” says Thedorf, who partners with producers including [AldenAlli](#), [Kobler Estate Winery](#), [Three Sticks Wines](#), and [Chenoweth Wines](#). “They’re not pushed to join a wine club, or to do a certain flight or listen to a spiel that maybe they don’t want to listen to.” They keep people coming back with the opportunity to join for \$20 a year and access free tastes every week, as well as intimate winemaker events.



Michael Woolsey

Moezidis says that during the COVID era, automated wine-pouring stations have become a godsend for perpetually short-staffed hotels and restaurants. In August 2021, 6.8 percent of hospitality workers said, “I quit,” according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That’s more than double the average quit rate of 2.9 percent for the rest of the workforce. Thedorf says the self-serve machines made it possible for Region to be open while most winery tasting rooms in Sonoma County were shut down due to county health restrictions; they offer food from their neighbors at Acre Pizza, the Farmer’s Wife, and Sushi Kosho.

Now, Thedorf says 60 percent of clients prefer the self-serve side, while 40 percent choose to have a team member pour wine and talk. But she says no matter how advanced wine tech gets, the human element will always matter. “The machines are this bright, shiny object,” Thedorf says. “It will never replace that connection from wine to people. With wine, people really want the stories.”