



Wine blending class at the Grand Bohemian provides education, fun night out

By Julia Sayers

April 05, 2016



In a window-lined room with a large table set with glasses, beakers, and bottles, Forrest Pitts floats around to guests seated at the table, glass of wine in hand. People walk by and glance through the floor-to-ceiling windows, hesitating for a minute with a look of curiosity. Some cautiously open the door and ask what's going on. It's the Wine Blending class at the Grand Bohemian Mountain Brook, and people are intrigued.

One of the hottest openings on the city's scene this year, the Birmingham boutique hotel is one of only two hotels nationwide that offers a wine blending class (the second is the hotel's sister property in Charleston). The class, which takes up to two hours, teaches participants not only how to taste wines but also how to create red wine blends.

The class begins with the tasting. Pitts pours four single-grape varieties from Raymond Vineyards—Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, and Petite Sirah—and has guests taste and take notes on each one. Then, he brings out a cheese platter and has them taste again, this time noting how the food changes the taste of the wine and vice versa.

After the tasting is finished, the blending begins. Guests pour different amounts and combinations of wines into a graduated cylinder, using a large, graduated pipette, if necessary, to reduce or add amounts. Each blend is tested on a 100ml scale and guests write down the percentages of each wine used.

Once guests are satisfied with their blend (they can make as many as necessary until pleased with the combination), Pitts, using a high-tech wine dispensing machine, types in the percentages used in each guest's blend, fills a standard 750-ml bottle with the wine, then corks it. A custom label (guests send a photo, logo, or design in advance of the class) is then put on the bottle.

Pitts—who is the head sommelier of the hotel—is no stranger to wine. He was a wine buyer at Hot and Hot Fish Club for several years and built the wine menu at Ovenbird before accepting his current position.

"I was actually considering pivoting out of wine," Pitts says. "But this was too unique of an opportunity to pass up."

Despite his vast knowledge of wine, Pitts only offers up his tasting notes after guests have written down theirs. He says he likes to see what guests taste on their own, instead of telling them what they should be tasting.

But you don't have to be a wine expert to take and enjoy the class. "It works well for people who are very knowledgeable of wine, but it's especially fun to work with those who are a little hesitant," Pitts says. "The nature of the wine world is to be esoteric. I get a lot of people in the room that think they won't be up to par but to see them open up to it and feel like they have involvement and authority is a lot of fun."

The classes attract a variety of participants. Some people just want to take the class and be done; others want to really enjoy themselves and linger a little longer. Some want the basics, while others want a very in-depth class. The classes are designed to be flexible.

"It's not meant to be pedantic or dry," Pitts says. "But I try to get as deep as my guests will let me."

The classes, offered Tuesday-Saturday, are perfect for a multitude of occasions, including birthdays, date night, team building, and corporate events.

"It has an educational component to it, but it's also about having a good time," says Thomas Hoffman, general manager of the hotel. "It's a different way of spending an evening together."

You'll take your blended bottle home with you, but the hotel also stores your blend combination. So if you come back for dinner or drinks and want to have your blend, they can produce a bottle of it (\$40) and serve it to you—something that makes the Grand Bohemian unlike any place else in the city.

Class schedule:

Tues.-Thurs.: 6 p.m.

Friday: 3 p.m., 6 p.m.

Saturday: 12:30 p.m., 3 p.m., 6 p.m.