

BUSINESS

# LIVES

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## Wine anxiety

Novices are taking control with education and training



**GETTING A GRIP:** Jodie Fanelli gave herself and fiancé Salvatore Strazzullo a wine class for Christmas.

BY LISA FICKENSCHER

**N**EW YORKERS ARE TIRED OF FAKING IT. After too many experiences of poring over inscrutable wine menus, wandering aimlessly in liquor stores and struggling to decipher the lexicon of oenophiles, they are taking action. Enrolling in wine courses has become as fashionable as scoring a reservation at Spice Market or Per Se these days. Trend-conscious, mostly twenty- to fortysomething New Yorkers are seeking to educate themselves about vino.

The goal is not just to reduce embarrassment, See WINE on Page 30

**THE STATS**  
Grape Explosion

6,500  
types of wine now  
available vs.  
3,000  
20 years ago

Sources: Impact Databank, Kevin Zraly

## Wine novices get educated

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but to be able to speak knowledgeably about an increasingly hip topic.

"I feel a lot of pressure when I'm handed the wine list," says Jodie Fanelli, who runs real estate firm J.V.D. Development with her two siblings. "When I finally pick a bottle the waiter recommends something else, and I feel like I chose a horrible wine."

Ms. Fanelli decided to bolster herself by taking a \$480 course at NYC Wine Class. As a Christmas gift, she also signed up her fiancé, Salvatore Strazzullo, who has his own law firm.

Interest in wine has been building for many years, as have the number of varieties available. Knowing one's way around French, Italian and Californian wines isn't enough anymore. Many more countries, including Argentina, Greece and Hungary, have entered the U.S. market over the past 20 years. All 50 states have wineries now, too.

**Beverage of choice**

A RECENT GALLUP POLL shows that, for the first time, Americans prefer wine over beer. "This is the golden age for wine," says Kevin Zraly, who has written several books on the

topic and has been teaching the Windows on the World Wine School class for 30 years.



ROCK ENOIS

**'If someone says a wine has legs ... I just don't get it'**

Education isn't cheap, though. Mr. Zraly's course, offered twice a year at the Marriott Marquis, is \$995 for eight weekly classes. And a

seminar he's been holding with retailer Sherry-Lehmann for the past three years costs \$250 to \$350 a person for one evening.

But cost is no object when one's reputation is on the line.

Mr. Strazzullo, for one, wishes he'd been savvier when a client sent him a \$500 bottle of Sassicaia four years ago. "The client called me afterward, and I didn't even know what Sassicaia was," he says. Rather than saving the special wine for an appropriate occasion, he says, "I drank it with [Ms. Fanelli] that week."

**Tower of babble**

BUT THESE BUDDING connoisseurs are not just trying to avoid awkwardness. Knowing about wine is now a mark of sophistication, and having just a passing acquaintance with the language no longer cuts it. "Full-bodied," "oaky," "buttery" or "good tannins" are among the terms New Yorkers want to demystify.

"If someone says a wine has legs or that it's nutty, I just don't get it," says Adrienne Lopez, a lawyer and co-author of *To Love, Honor, and Betray: The Secret Lives of Suburban Wives*. She plunked down \$75 to attend the CD101.9 New York Festival of Wines last weekend.

**THE FORMAL TASTING: DOS AND DON'TS**

- Start with white, then red
- Let wine fall over entire tongue
- Use the spit bucket
- Don't wear perfume or cologne
- Don't eat vinegary salads or brined foods beforehand
- Don't chew gum

Source: Hanna Lee, president of NYC chapter of Women for WineSense

"It sounds elitist to say that I need to know about wines for my job, but it reduces your embarrassment in business situations," Ms. Lopez says.

Most people assume that if a wine is expensive it must be good and, conversely, that a cheaper bottle must be bad. Ms. Lopez wants to walk into a wine store and not feel that she has to spend \$20 or more to get a decent wine. Though she's often tempted to buy a zinfandel, "they're really cheap, and I don't think that's good; I wonder whether I'll get a headache," she says.

Others are informing themselves so that they can make the most of expense-account meals. A year ago, Maria Grazia Asselle, a vice president at Citibank, joined the New York chapter of Women for WineSense, a nonprofit group that meets once a month for tastings and lectures at local restaurants. Now when she's invited to fancy

restaurants by clients, she takes charge of ordering the wine.

"Sometimes no one knows anything about wine, so I don't want to waste the opportunity to try a great bottle," Ms. Asselle says.

All this training is paying off. Adriano Mattei, sommelier at Churrascaria Plataforma Tribeca, which has earned an award of distinction from *Wine Spectator*, is fielding fewer requests from customers who need his expertise. That's no small feat when one considers Churrascaria's list: a 20-page book including 700 choices.

Still, Mr. Mattei knows when to come to the rescue. "Sometimes we get customers who look like they are reading Egyptian," he says. "A sure sign that he needs me is when his head is pointed down but his eyes are looking around for help."

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Source:  
Hanna Lee,  
President of  
NYC Chapter of  
Women for WineSense