

33rd Annual Monterey Wine Festival celebrates food and wine, especially wine

By LILY DAYTON
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It's about supporting sustainable agriculture and open space. It's about culture, heritage and making an artistic statement. It's about sitting down at the table and breaking bread with your family. It's about wine.

Tonight (Thursday), Monterey will celebrate the wine industry with the opening night of the 33rd Annual Monterey Wine Festival at the Monterey Bay Aquarium on Cannery Row.

The festivities will continue tomorrow (Friday) at the Hyatt Regency Monterey, with wineries presenting their new releases. Local wineries will be featured, as well as wineries from Oregon, Washington and as far away as Australia.

What is now the oldest multiday wine festival in North America first began as an industry-only event, where wineries and restaurateurs from around the region would meet to talk shop and trade secrets, taste new wines and find new ways to promote the industry.

"It was one of the first wine festivals on the entire West Coast," said Bert Cutino, owner of the Sardine Factory and one of the festival's original founders. "It was created in March, traditionally a slow time for the industry, to give people a chance to experience wines on the West Coast."

According to the current festival director, Tina Curry, it was opened up to the public about five years ago. Just last year, they brought the trade industry back to the festival by including food service companies, distributors and food manufacturers.

"We want to attract both foodies and wine enthusiasts," said Curry. "This festival is about completing the circle for guests. They can talk to the actual winemakers and owners and hopefully they'll find their next great wine value and their new favorite. We've invited new producers, small wineries and some that are not known at the store. On the food side, you can follow the chain from producer to distributor to restaurant or home table. The event is based on the whole circle."

The lineup for tonight sounds attractive: wander through the aquarium tasting some of the world's finest wines, eat food from local restaurants as well as larger gourmet food distributors and stop by the oyster bar — all this as you meander through the aquarium's world-class exhibits, getting a glimpse of the underwater world.

All exhibits should be open for this event, except for those containing light-sensitive animals such as the penguins and sea otters.

Friday's event at the Hyatt will feature many of the same restaurants and wineries, but the focus will be on pouring each winery's new releases for the 2009 season.

Guests can sample these newest wines while strolling through the Regency Ballroom, relaxing on the terrace or lounging on the deck to watch some of the comical movie clips that will be shown.

Chef Patrice, a chef from the French Embassy, will be demonstrating three California-style dishes that

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During the entire event, Steve Lin will play live background music on his acoustic guitar.

"Some of the new releases will be from wineries like Black Stallion, which you can only get from the winery," said Curry. "You can't possibly go to 100 wineries so this is a great way to sample them all in one place."

Events like this are important for cellar-direct wineries, such as Black Stallion, to connect their product with consumers.

"Our wine is only sold through our winery, wine clubs and our Web site," said Marilyn Webster, special event, tour and tasting manager of Black Stallion Winery in Napa Valley. "That way we know when it reaches the customer it's the way we intend it to be. There's no shipping, no shelving. If it sits for six months under fluorescent lights or in a hot store room, it can ruin the taste."

Organizations such as ZAP (Zinfandel Advocates and Producers) will be there to promote the importance of the wine industry, particularly Zinfandel, to California.

"The Monterey Wine Festival has a long and great tradition as a wine festival in California," said Rebecca Robinson, executive director of ZAP. "Many of our members have been pouring there in the past, but this is the first time we'll have a presence and focus on Zinfandel. We were thrilled to be invited. Zinfandel is such a great food wine — it's a great pairing with seafood."

The ZAP wineries that will be there are a representation of Zinfandel from the main regions of California — Dogwood Cellars from Mendocino, Michael-David from Lodi, Robert Biale from a family

of three generations of winemaking in Napa, Side Job Cellars from Sonoma and Perry Creek from the Sierra foothills.

Local wineries, such as Scheid Vineyards, will have a strong presence at the festival to promote the growing importance of Monterey County as a major wine region in California.

"Up until about 10 years ago, 80 percent of the wine grapes produced here were exported out of the county," said Heidi Scheid, principal owner of Scheid Vineyards. "It's a shame really. Most of these went to Sonoma or Napa Valley. This was because Monterey County hadn't yet identified itself as a major wine region. The fact that there are now Monterey wines recognized as excellent wines represents a huge amount of progress in the past decade. The Monterey Wine Festival really celebrates this."

Some of the features that make Monterey County a world-famous tourist destination also make it a premiere location for growing wine grapes: abundant sunshine, ocean breezes and vast acreage of open space.

Add to this the region's rich soils, longest growing season of anyplace else in California and diverse microclimates that allow the growth of a wide spectrum of varietals and it makes for a world-class wine region.

"Ultimately, we hope that people from outside the area will learn about Monterey wines," said Scheid. "That is the only way to develop a reputation to sell more wine and to be able to price it as a top wine — for people to recognize Monterey on the label. Monterey has finally reached the ranks of an excellent wine region."

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WINE FESTIVAL

·What: 33rd annual Monterey Wine Festival
·Where: Monterey Bay Aquarium on Cannery Row;
Hyatt Regency, 1 Old Golf Course Road, Monterey

·When: Aquarium event 7:30-10:30 p.m. Thursday,
Oct. 1; Hyatt event 5-9p.m. Friday, Oct. 2

·Tickets: \$99 at www.montereywine.com or at the
following: A Taste of Monterey on Cannery Row,
Bargetto Winery Tasting Room on Cannery Row,
Baywood Cellars on Cannery Row, Cork 'N' Bottle in
Pacific Grove, Grapes 'n' Grain Wines & Liquor in
Salinas, Grove Market in Pacific Grove, Hellam's
Tobacco Shop in Monterey, International Market &
Deli in Monterey, La Casa Bodega in Monterey,
Monte Vista Wine & Spirits in Monterey, Surf & Sand
in Carmel and the SPCA of Monterey County

·Information: www.montereywine.com

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