

Grape Communicators

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By CAROLE DICKEY In The Loop

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WESLEY CHAPEL - Just as some wines improve with age, the business of selling wines improves with the march of time. Some strategies are obvious: offering selection variety; having knowledgeable, friendly people; and providing extra services, such as catering wine tastings, cocktail parties and dinners. But today, the tried and true isn't always enough. Stores are finding it necessary to step outside the box to remain competitive.

Village Wine & Spirits, 1836 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Wesley Chapel, added a bar to entice customers. "I think that's what makes us unique," said Jeffrey DeWitt, store manager. "We have a high-end elegant bar inside our store where people can try different drinks."

If they want a few drinks with friends or a bottle of wine to take home or give as a gift, they can get it at the store, he said. "The problem is, a lot of new wine drinkers don't know what they like," said Robert Gassaway, president of Village Wine & Spirits. "So you can go into our bar and try all of our varietals across the board and be able to determine what you like."

However, the tried and true remains a major thrust of their marketing. Gassaway has developed a program that takes the guesswork out of catering and party planning. He also helps customers with their selections. One feature is a custom-designed L-shaped, 6-foot-high wine rack that runs 40 feet along one wall, with a 20-foot extension open from both sides.

It offers customers a selection that might be intimidating for some, but the staff is there to help them if they aren't sure what they want.

"I encourage people to tell me what their price budget is and then I will give them the best wine that we have for the price point they are looking for," he said. "We painstakingly came up with our diverse selection of wines, which has both very high end name recognizable wines and a lot of value-driven, highly rated wines."

Cork & Olive, 1269 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., has its own agenda for reaching out to wine shoppers. They also subscribe to the tried and true - selection, customer service and catering events - but take an innovative approach to their wine offerings.

Larry Parker, store general manager, believes one selling point is working with small vintners, which allows them to sell high-quality wines at a lower price. "The vintners that supply the wines we carry don't mass produce their wine, so a lot of your bigger chain grocery stores won't have these wines," he said. However, customers needn't fear buying an unfamiliar brand, because they have an opportunity to taste test the product before making a purchase, he said.

Not only are their wines more selective, but, because they are not mass-produced, which puts more sulfates in the wine, the smaller vintners' wines cause fewer headaches, he said. "Your headaches come with the higher sulfate content, which comes from mass production," he said.

The store encourages patrons to taste wines. The motto above the tasting table reads, "Trust your taste." "It doesn't have to be expensive to be good," said Nancy Herman, a wine guide in the store. "It's all about flavor and to trust your taste."

In addition to the opportunity to taste test wines before buying, patrons are invited to a monthly Sip & Dip, a free customer appreciation night. Food is catered, wine tastings are held at various stations and live music enhances the atmosphere. Patrons with a preferred customer card can get a 15 percent discount on purchases. The next Sip & Dip is Jan. 25.

"This time we're taking it a step further," Herman said. "We're going to have a costume party, a Gasparilla party."