

wine sales' newest vintage

Traditional connoisseurs, forget old expectations when you sample the new chain wine stores, where newcomers to wine can find strong notes of advice, enhancing a bouquet of personal preference.



Times photos — WILLIAM DUNNLEY

Michael Probst of Tampa says his chain of Cork & Olive wine shops markets to novice wine drinkers who want simpler approaches to selecting a bottle.

BY CHRIS SHERMAN | TIMES FOOD CRITIC

the little old wine shop is getting its first makeover in years, by chains and franchisees who want to look bright and shiny for novice drinkers eager to join the wine lifestyle.

Four new chains around the Tampa Bay area have tossed out fashions long popular with traditional wine drinkers and intimidating to newcomers. In 20 new locations by the end of the year there will be no fussy cellars, crowded liquor aisles, vast supermarkets or box-cluttered warehouses.

Instead, Cork & Olive, WineStyles, Vino 100 and the Grape will populate malls or new strip centers in booming neighborhoods. Marketing from all four pictures their customers as young and as vibrant as those in ads for the Gap or for Lifestyles fitness centers.

The New World wine shops make selection easier by limiting to under 200 the labels they stock, many of them unknown.

"Who needs 2,000 bottles of wine to pick something for dinner?" asks Cork & Olive's Michael Probst, a dapper German who came to Tampa to start his version of the Starbucks dream. So far, he has nine shops.

Reduced inventory leaves more room for roving salespeople, dawdling customers and sleek furniture. Probst designed his own packaging and modern shelving of polished wood and industrial piping. It had to be strong, contemporary and, he says, "elegant."

Traditional wine merchants, already challenged by supermarkets, discounters and the Internet, say their advantage remains personal service and the wine savvy to get better wine at lower prices.

Veterans like Lee Neal, who stocks 3,000 wines at Pic Pac Liquors in St. Petersburg, admits there's public fear and misunderstanding about wine, but says traditional shops get a bum rap as stuffy and expensive. Their staffs are helpful to newcomers and most of the wine is less than \$15 a bottle.

Yet the chains think there is a big thirst

for a new look and sales pitch, especially in Florida. By the end of 2006, new chains will have 20 shops from Sarasota to Tampa.

Because the goal is to bring new consumers to the table, almost every chain store has a big one, wood or marble, in the center or front of the store, with open bottles and staff and customers gathered around it. Counter and cash register are discreetly hidden.

The Grape, a Georgia chain, has taken tasting further and installed an entire restaurant and wine bar in its stores. In downtown St. Petersburg, a wine bar called Tastings uses another concept, offering well-known wines that consumers can buy from stylish Italian coolers; the founders may eventually franchise.

Something missing from new-generation stores: signs for "Italy" or "merlot" or any other traditional name of grape, region or country, or labels of recognizable wineries. Instead the focus is on easy spectrums of body and flavor, labeled

Please see WINE 5E



Diane Ackerman, left, gets some expert advice from Lee Neal, founder of Pic Pac Liquors, at the St. Petersburg store, amid a traditional, large wine selection.