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Wine sellers hope to guide customers' choices in filling their cellars

By Lindsay Durango

Wine Gourmet tries to present customers with wine education and to break down the perception that good means expensive and expensive means good. Among the racks of wine, boxes of cigars, cheeses and imported beers at Wine Gourmet are three experts who help make the shop in Botetourt Commons unique among wine retailers.

"Customers have started to trust us, trust our palate," owner Kimberly Eakin said of her two-year-old business. Little wonder. Of the 330 Certified Specialists of Wine across the world, Wine Gourmet employs three: Eakin, wine and cigar consultant Larry Shaver and manager Gordon Kendall. Fellow staffer Sarah Merchant is pursuing certification.

The certified specialist distinction, given by the Society of Wine Educators, represents a high level of knowledge about wine regions of the world, viticulture, grape varieties and wine production, said Geralyn Brostrom, director of education for the society. Specialists include sommeliers, restaurant owners, students and wholesalers.

Though certification is a budding path among retailers, "It's unique that their [Wine Gourmet's] entire staff would be certified," Brostrom said. Kendall said retailers usually don't get so involved with wine education. "And they don't have to," Shaver chimed in. All that retailers need to do to successfully sell wine is provide customers with a list of top-rated vintages and labels. "That's only half of what we try to do."

Snobbery not sold here

Don't confuse all this knowledge with elitism. "People are a little intimidated by wine snobs and wine snobbery," said Kendall, who was the first of the Wine Gourmet staff to achieve certification, in 1997. The Wine Gourmet staff is far from snobby. Kendall said that after he's introduced a customer to a new label, his favorite question to ask the customer is "How much do you think that costs?" He usually follows up the high-range guess with "Nope. \$7.95."

Along with its credentials - including last year's "Best New Shop" platinum award from The Roanoker magazine and four-star marks for best wine selection from City Magazine - Wine Gourmet tries to present customers with wine education and to break down the perception that good means expensive and expensive means good.

When customers come to the store, they can peruse up to 600 kinds of wines, 150 kinds of beer and 20 types of cigars. "We try to take the time to explain," Kendall said. But beyond lessons on the spot, Kendall, Shaver and Eakin teach classes on Spanish and Italian wines, and classes titled Bordeaux Basics and Wines of the Southern Hemisphere. The staff also covers the Beginner's Guide to Wine Appreciation.

Kendall's favorite class is Calling All Merlot Lovers, which he leads. During the class, Kendall conducts a blind tasting. In other words, he has students sample a number of labels without telling them which they're sampling. When all's said and sipped, Kendall's pulled a fast one on them, revealing that some of the more favored samples are in fact the least expensive.

People who sign up for the classes tend to be walk-ins or friends of former students. One class costs \$25 per person or \$40 per couple, and Eakin said the response has been overwhelming. Of the Bordeaux Basics course in March, Eakin said "We were turning people away from that class." And as the staff fills curious minds with wine facts, Eakin said she's hearing a demand for more advanced classes.

Full service

Wine Gourmet puts out an e-newsletter for 800 subscribers, who include store walk-ins and Internet customers. It also hosts wine tastings every Saturday. It operates a Wine of the Month club featuring labels hand-picked by the staff that never cost more than \$15 a bottle. ("It's like having your own personal wine buyer," Eakin said.) The shop runs corporate wine tastings at places such as Black Dog Salvage in Roanoke, and customers have asked staff members to attend wine tastings at their homes.

With so much exposure, Wine Gourmet's customer base has spread. Eakin said that orders placed through their Web site have come from as far as New Mexico and Washington state. "Wasn't there a New Zealand guy?" Shaver asked. "He wanted an Australian wine!" Eakin answered. "I said 'Aren't you a little closer?'" That sale hit a roadblock, but, Shaver joked, "We know we're in when we start shipping New Zealand wine to New Zealand."

Wine Gourmet is located in Botetourt Commons, 112 Kingston Drive, Daleville. Phone number is (540)591-2012. On the Net: www.winegourmet.biz