

I'll drink to that

BY HATTIE KLOTZ, OTTAWA CITIZEN JANUARY 2, 2014



Debbie Trenholm of The Savvy Company and Don Cook, agent and wine consultant, toast the season at Das Lokal Kitchen and Bar.

Photograph by: Wayne Cuddington, Ottawa Citizen

My husband likes his wine. He reads about wine, he plans what he'll drink with dinner and he scours the LCBO magazine when it arrives in the mail.

Occasionally, I'm inspired to buy him wine as a Christmas or birthday present, both of which happen in the latter part of December, only adding to the stress of the season.

Here's how it usually goes: I make a pilgrimage to the LCBO.

I scan the shelves and recognize all the usual suspects.

I head downstairs to Vintages and I become increasingly glassy-eyed as I peruse the thousands of bottles, ranging from tens of dollars to several thousand dollars. I set my budget, if there's someone around I take advice and then I usually buy according to the label I like best. Nine times out of 10, I pick an expensive dud.

It shouldn't be like this, says Don Cook, a wine consultant based in Ottawa. "It doesn't need to be this intimidating," he says.

But what are the alternatives? "Either you can head over to Quebec to the SAQ, where the model is similar but the wines are skewed towards more French labels, or you can turn to a consultant who offers wine on consignment."

In other words, you can buy wines that are not available through the LCBO or SAQ; wines that come recommended by someone in the industry.

The drawback is you'll have to make a minimum order of 12 bottles, but the upsides are numerous.

You don't have to drive to the store and park, you don't have to lug your purchase home and if you order on a Monday you can have your wine delivered to your door by Friday.

Cook represents four Niagara wineries directly and about 12 other agencies based out of Toronto in partnership with Rob Beardall in Ottawa. They sell to a range of restaurants in the city. "We pick the best from each agency, which allows for a consistency of price and product."

Cook, whose only ambition as a teenager was to become a ski bum, discovered his love for wine when his mother, food writer Gay Cook, arranged for him to spend six months as a bus boy at Café Henri Burger. There, the sommelier took an interest and gave him a crash course. Qualifications from Algonquin College and a master's in wine in Australia followed.

Cook has now been in the business for more than 20 years and he's worked in the industry in California, Boston, Seattle and Italy. Recently, he was asked to teach a New World wine course at Algonquin, the place where it all began.

Cook produces a wine letter quarterly with his picks for the season. "I generally try to keep the majority of my recommendations in the good-value range, between \$13 and \$25," he says. "But then I realize that there are special occasions, so I include a couple of bottles in the higher end."

What's he drinking now?

"I'm a seasonal drinker, so I choose Champagne at this time of year around the holidays."

Another approach to the wine conundrum is through The Savvy Company. Founder and owner Debbie Trenholm offers her expertise in Ontario wines to choose a selection of the best available in the province. You can sign up for a monthly package of three, six or 12 bottles to be delivered anywhere in Ontario.

These are also wines you won't find on the shelves at the LCBO.

“Our sommeliers get together in a group to taste the wines. As a group, we’ll choose the ones we think show off what Ontario can offer,” she says.

The 11-year-old Savvy Company also offers cheese-pairing recommendations online and may soon offer shipments of cheese to complement their wines.

Another approach is to choose a wine you really enjoyed when you went out to dinner in a restaurant. For the most part, these wines are not stocked by the LCBO, so how do you get hold of them?

Well, in the past, you’d probably have had to persuade the sommelier to order you a few extra bottles next time they got a shipment. Now you can visit Winewire.ca, a Toronto-based service that will put you directly in touch with the agent for the wine you like.

Founded in September 2012 by Adam Bekhor and Nelson Abreu, Winewire.ca has created a new marketplace for international wines served in restaurants in Ontario. Once again, you’ll have to buy a minimum of 12 bottles, but you won’t pay restaurant prices.

“Winewire makes it super easy for the consumer to contact agents,” explains Bekhor, “and while you can have your wine shipped to your home or your office, you can have it shipped to your local LCBO for free if you live outside Toronto.”

Currently, you can find more than 500 wines on Winewire.ca that are only for sale in Ontario restaurants. Bekhor and Abreu hope that by September 2014 they’ll be listing more than 1,000.

“It all started when I became frustrated by my wine-buying experiences, that I couldn’t buy some of the delicious bottles that I would try at restaurants,” explains Bekhor. “We’re in business to delight customers by providing access to wines not at the LCBO and to take some of the anxiety out of wine buying. It’s just an alcoholic beverage after all.”

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WineWire founders Adam Bekhor (left) and Nelson Abreu (right). for 0104-life-wine Adam Bekhor, left, and Nelson Abreu are the founders of Winewire.ca, which offers a selection of more than 500 wines online that are otherwise for sale only in Ontario restaurants.

Photograph by: Handout photo, WineWire Inc.

