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EVENTS

Winter Wine Spectacular fills glasses and hearts

The Easter Seals event is the jewel in the crown of the Liquor Commission's Wine Week

BY CINDY KIBBE

The 2009 Winter Wine Spectacular – which is taking place next year on Jan. 29 at the Radisson Hotel Center of New Hampshire in Manchester — is the largest wine tasting north of Boston. Some 1,200 wines from around the world are offered to the public to let people learn a bit more about one of life's sublime pleasures. It's also a great opportunity to support Easter Seals New Hampshire and the 18,000 people the organization assists.

With a wine tasting on the scale of the Winter Wine Spectacular, participants should spend a few moments to prepare. It helps to have an idea of what you want to taste before you go in. Work on a specific varietal, appellation or even some key vintners you're interested in.

I went to the 2008 Spectacular in January with the idea of just trying some wines made by vineyards I had never heard of.

My first stop was at the table of Whitehall Lane Winery of Napa Valley, Calif. Tom Leonardini Jr., sales director for his family's winery, was on hand to pour samples of the Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. This reserve wine was 100 percent cab, giving you big, bold flavors of cherry and a touch of toast from the French oak.

I had heard a lot about Merriman Wines and now was my chance to taste one. While the wines are made in limited cases — about 2,000 or so — from California grapes, it is a New England-headquartered company. Based in Burlington, Mass., Peter Merriman, a New England native, directs operations like a conductor directs an orchestra, creating music in a glass.

The Merlot hails from the Russian River Valley in the Golden State, and indeed won some gold in the San Francisco Chronicle wine tasting. It gave a great balance of raspberry fruit to the deep spice the wine is known for. Merriam's gold-winning Cabernet Franc is an perfect example of why this varietal is just beginning to come into its own. Traditionally a red wine blender, this Cab Franc had lots of plummy flavors enhanced by a floral nose.

Cellar Select Room

A while back, I had written another column about a book on the Mondavi family, a wine dynasty if there ever was one. In attendance at the Wine Spectacular was Charles Krug Winery, an old winery brought to life a few times by Peter Mondavi.

I sampled the Zinfandel from St. Helena, Calif. Big red berry flavors like raspberry were layered on a perfectly structured wine.

I also happen to be a sucker for South African Sauvignon Blancs. They have a unique character epitomizing New World meets Old World wine-



making. Golden Kaan, one of South Africa's largest wineries, is located on the Western Cape. The Sauvignon Blanc shows that exquisite terroir that has more melon and tropical fruit flavors and less of an herbal quality than New Zealand or even American versions. It also is a great one to try when investigating that mythic varietal character known as "mineral." It's a good taste, not quite bright acidity, not quite earthy, but something in between. It tastes something like the way granite smells after a rain.

Another highlight of the tasting is the Bellman Jeweler's Cellar Select Room, a collection of reserve wines from some of the finest winemakers in the world. These are the best of the best, and this rare chance is worth the additional admission price of \$120.

One note of caution, this tasting-within-a-tasting is extremely popular. If you do plan on going, visit the Cellar Select Room first. Later in the evening, it is the place to be and you might not get as much dedicated time with wine representatives as you'd like. Everyone wants to try these wines!

Here's another nice tidbit to consider: If you find a wine you like so much you wish to purchase it, the NHLC provides a form to which the vendors can affix a unit number label. Show your order list to the registration table on your way out and you can receive discounts on every bottle of wine you purchase at a local NHLC outlet store near you.

Sponsored by Riverstone, the Easter Seals New Hampshire Winter Wine Spectacular is the jewel in the crown of the New Hampshire Liquor Commission's Wine Week — seven days of wine dinners, bottle auctions and signings as well as opportunities to personally meet some of the world's most noted winemakers. For more information, visit nh.gov/liquor.

The Winter Wine Spectacular is always a sellout, so plan now and buy your tickets early. It is truly one of the Granite State's not-to-be-missed events. Where else can you have so much fun and do so much good at the same time?

Tickets cost \$60 for the Grand Tasting from 6 to 9 p.m., \$120 for the Bellman's Cellar Select and \$150 to take part in both.

For more information, visit eastersealsnh.org or call 888-368-8880. **NHBR**

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