

Vintner's Cellar: Make time for wine

New Hampshire wineries offer customers a one-of-a-kind experience.

By JULIA K. AGRESTO

Few are so lucky as to turn their love of wine into a bona fide business – but Renate Wallem and Virginia Fressola are two such women.

Wallem's passion for good wine, paired with her background in the hospitality industry and years of banking experience, eventually led to the opening of a unique custom winery just over a year ago.

Wallem, 46, of Kingston, opened Vintner's Cellar of Bedford in May 2008, and since then has run the show entirely on her own – handling everything from marketing to wine production.

But for Wallem, all of this is a small price to pay for being able to do something she loves.

"I always enjoyed wine and when the company I worked for in Boston was acquired in 2007, I was looking to do something different," Wallem said. "My husband and I were customers at the Vintner's Cellar Winery in Portsmouth, and we enjoyed our experience there. That's where I started to do my research."

Vintner's Cellar is a unique microwinery where the customers are the wine-makers. Aside from Bedford, Vintner's Cellar also has three other locations in New Hampshire: Concord, Portsmouth and North Conway. In total, Vintner's Cellar has about 40 stores throughout the U.S.

Customers can choose from a variety of the finest wines and add their personal touch to a blend of wine of their choosing. Wallem guides her customers through the wine-tasting process, as well as blending, bottling, corking and even creating personalized labels – as does Fressola, in the Concord store.

Fressola, 48, of Concord, owns the Vintner's Cellar of Concord along with her husband, Larry. The two have owned the winery since the beginning, when the store opened in October 2008.

The shop offers up to 30 varieties of wine for purchase with their fun and Concord-themed labels, and many more bottles are available to purchase with a custom label, like Wallem's winery.

The existing Concord storefront, which was a kitchen cabinet store, has been transformed into what is now the winery, with a Mediterranean-like courtyard and what Fressola calls a “conversation-inducing” U-shaped wine-tasting bar. Murals invoking Tuscany’s lush landscapes adorn the walls, making customers feel as though they are actually in Italy sipping the finest wines.

Fressola said she has always enjoyed drinking wine, but in the past few years she has become more interested in the many varieties and nuances of red and white wines.

“Things all fell into place for us to open the winery beginning with a gift we received from Larry’s daughter for winemaking classes,” she said. “From the very first class, we were hooked. We began to look at this as a possible future business venture. We moved to New Hampshire to follow our dream of opening this business in a place where we both wanted to live.”

Like Wallem, Fressola started out in a very different career, but was fortunate enough to transition into a job that was more of a passion than a profession.

Today, Vintner’s Cellars of Bedford and Concord are a reality for both women – and a successful one, at that – offering customers a uniquely personal experience.

Both Wallem and Fressola said the best part of owning a Vintner’s Cellar winery is helping customers create their own custom wines and labels.

“My favorite part of my job is creating the wine labels for customers,” Fressola said. “Often, I’m given a photograph or concept and I get a chance to create a unique, one-of-a-kind label for their wine.”

Wallem agreed.

“When I hear back from customers that their gift was special, that makes me feel good about what we created,” she said.

At the end of the day, both women are truly wine-lovers through and through – and Wallem thinks everyone else should be, too.

“I believe that drinking wine makes every meal an occasion, every table more elegant,” she said. “Everyone should enjoy wine the way they want to enjoy it.”

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