

Stop Whining About Bad Booze and Go Get Some Tasty Free Wine

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If you find your four-dollar pint at 1020 growing staler by the week then you should don your city coat for a charmed afternoon on the town, sampling some of Manhattan's myriad wine-tasting events that take place largely free of charge—that is, if 1020's cattle-car ambiance piqued with dangerous stray darts and prodding pool cues doesn't prove too much to leave behind.

Equipped with a web browser and an inquisitive palate, I was surprised by the ease with which an expensive hobby can become accessible. Sure it's a bit of work, but you'll be amazed how much a spot of 2005 Portuguese Ensaios red wine (a fruity, alcohol-packed new production from the ambitious Pato estate) lightens up the bustle of the New York sidewalks.

With a few jotted addresses on a notepad (the Web site you want is www.localwineevents.com/New-Yo...), I headed down to an antique vaulted cellar on 72nd Street called Acker Merrall & Condit, where several of these Portuguese bruisers were on offer. A smiling, soused distributor—whose job includes the marathon task of helping you sip and shop your wines for a full three hours—regaled me with the journey of the wine, from its conception as a marriage of Baga and Alfrocheiro grapes, to its harvest this time two years ago, to its grass-roots promoting across the pond.

Katell Pleven, co-owner of the merchants Ibanez-Pleven Offerings, believes that the appeal of these more obscure bottles is tied to the ascension of boutique European restaurants that served doubly as showcases for unheralded wine producers. "Ten years ago, at an Italian restaurant you'd be served Chianti. There's such a broader interest now that has carried wine along with it. Spain is hot now because of [the appeal of] tapas."

Can you really say that Portugal reds have ridden the coattails of continental cuisine to the pinnacle of your wish list? Not, perhaps, if they're ending up as fodder for this college student's besotted excursion.

But the wine is tasty enough—it's like a salvo of bright berries charging ahead of an undistinguished body (14 percent alcohol)—so I move north to the hip boutique Pour, which was featuring a free wine tasting (our handy Web site tipped me off to this). Owner Tres Meyer seems reticent over the two wines on offer, rather excitedly directing me around his shop. At the shop, they pair your dinner of choice with wines to suitably impress your guests. The free wine isn't really flowing, though, so I make an escape.

Day two of my adventure dawns early enough to make a 2 p.m. tasting at the well-recommended **Union Square Wines** (Fourth Avenue at 13th Street), a friendly operation playing host to the Allan Scott Winery of New Zealand—with none other than Mr. Scott himself, apparently on a U.S. tour, dispensing big glasses of 2006 Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, and Pinot Noir. A young journalist stands beside the table with copies of a book, *First Big Crush*—his own memoir of a year toiling and boozing in the vineyards of Mr. Scott's estate (an occupation that has instantly topped my post-graduation job search).

Toward the back of the store I notice broad tables covered with tablecloths and bottles, and here find a Japanese sake tasting in full blush, as a motley crowd of New Yorkers sips absentmindedly and mingles. A menu breathlessly announces the head-to-head of "Top Sake!"—who am I to refuse?—so I make a beeline for a spread of nine selections on my left. A friendly man in elegant uniform pours me what he reckons to be their best offering, a sake from the Otokoyama business in northern Japan on sale for a whiplash-inducing \$111.99. My attempts to elicit praise of this "velvety smooth" stuff from the sake barman end quickly with gestures lost in translation and good-natured smiles all around.

It is in this parlor that I catch sight of my quarry—an Italian-made contraption that is rather a novelty, a stainless-steel dock of 20 bottles that are tapped for your tasting delight. *This oblique enomatic' machine purrs to life should you introduce your tasting card into the right slot, where credit earned from previous buys (every dollar spent nets you five points) elicits a dollop of chosen wine from the spicket into your outstretched mug.* Charming. Still, a glance at the bottles subjected to this treatment reveals a fascinating range, from the old patriarchs of Bordeaux and Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, to the entrepreneurs' latest offerings from Oregon and Austria. Bingers beware, the instruction manual threatens that "dispensing multiple pours of a single wine is in violation of USQ's tasting policy!" No love at first sight allowed.

But in our post-Sideways world, there is no more exciting wine destination than New York for the sheer number of opportunities. And my adventures prove that free wine tastings are in abundance at all times, should you be willing to do a bit of research. You can score some free sake just as easily as you can discover what wine best accompanies your dinner—often in the same 24 hours.