

WINE-O-MATIC By CHRIS ERIKSON - July 26, 2006

THE words "wine" and "vending machine" don't usually set a oenophile's heart pounding. The words "2004 Clos des Papes" and "free tasting" might, though, and all these concepts meet at Union Square Wines, now home to the city's first automated wine-tasting machines.



At the push of a button, the sleek, stainless-steel dispensers allow browsers to sample some four dozen wines, ranging from select budget bottles to a smattering of "premium pours," like the aforementioned Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

Jamie Rudolph celebrates her 21st birthday with a high-tech sampling station at Union Square Wines. Customers use a membership card to get sips. Photo: J. Scott Wynn

Built in Tuscany by a firm called Enomatic, the machines are commonly used to sell wine by the glass in Europe, not only in wine bars but in casual spots like train stations. In Italy, "the guy at the newsstand might have one," says Union Square's wine director, Jesse Salazar.

When Union Square Wines moved to its new location on Fourth Avenue and 13th Street earlier this summer, it became the first store in New York to use the machines to allow shoppers to sample before buying.

It works like this: When you make a purchase and register, you get a card computer-coded with 500 credits; you add five credits for every dollar you spend. Above each bottle is a red digital readout indicating how many credits are deducted per taste.

The number responds to the cost of the wine - a taste from a \$20 bottle costs 20 credits. (Most are in the 10- to 25-credit range; at the low end is Garnacha De Fuego from Spain for eight credits; at the top is a 1999 Gaja Sori Tilden, for 1,000.) Insert your card into a slot in the machine, take a glass from a nearby table, make your selection, and a 15-milliliter taste is dispensed through a slim steel spout while the credits are deducted from your total.

The key to the system is argon gas; the machines suck the oxygen out of the open bottles and replace it with the tasteless and odorless gas, preventing spoilage for up to a few weeks.

Eventually, the store's Web site will keep track of the wines a customer has tasted, "so if you find yourself on Monday thinking, 'What was that Riesling I tasted on Saturday?' you can look it up," Salazar says. Allison Carroll and Margaret Park, who were whiling away the evening comparing tasting notes in the "event room" in back of the store, gave the machines a thumbs-up.

"It's fun," says Carroll, and more relaxed than a tasting, "where you have to listen to their spiel, and then you feel bad if you don't like the wine."

The store encourages such lingering, and provides seating to encourage it, though they've had to confiscate cards from a few people who were clearly more interested in volume than vintage. "When you get some guy loading his glass up so that it's spilling out the sides, you know you've got someone who's more of a drinker than a taster," Salazar says.