

In San Francisco, Tasting Wine at the Touch of a Button

At VinoVenue, automatic dispensers let you try before you buy

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As catchphrases go, "wine automation" doesn't quite make your mouth water. But the new VinoVenue, which makes tasting and buying decisions push-button easy, might change that.

VinoVenue opened in September in San Francisco's hip South of Market district. Both a wine bar and a retail shop, it delivers a novel, high-tech twist. More than 100 bottlings can be sampled at slick, automated dispensers that function like vinous ATMs. Insert a card, which can be purchased in values from \$10 to \$100, then push the button under your desired selection and a 1-ounce sample squirts out of a stainless steel nozzle into your glass. If you want a bigger sample, just push the button again.

It's a user-friendly process. Tasting prices are indicated above each bottle in the dispensing machine; the cost of each selection is automatically deducted from the card, with a red digital readout displaying the remaining balance. Flavorless, odorless argon gas preserves the wines, ensuring freshness for up to a month.

The wines are grouped at stations, organized according to variety or wine type. The "lighter whites" station, for example, includes sample options such as the Chateau Ste. Michelle-Dr. Loosen Eroica Riesling Columbia Valley 2003 (91 points, \$1.80 per 1-ounce sample), the Sonnhof Grüner Veltliner Kamptal 2003 (\$1.40) and the Harrison Sauvignon Blanc Napa Valley 2003 (\$1.20). Bottle prices are posted at each of the 13 stations.

Most samples cost less than \$3, though there's a fine assortment of higher-end options. Prices at the "luxury-wine" station range from \$4.50 for the *premier cru* Michel Morey-Coffinet Chassagne-Montrachet Les Caillerets 2001 (89) up to \$28.50 for the Château d'Yquem 1997 (95).



Insert a card into the dispenser, push a button and out squirts a 1-ounce sample.



Customers at the new wine bar and retail store can serve themselves samples of more than 100 wines.

VinoVenue co-owners Mary Lynn Slattery and Nancy Rowland came up with the idea when they discovered the dispensing machines while traveling in Tuscany. "I think that the most exciting thing for people is that they can come in and try before buying," said Slattery, who hopes the San Francisco store will be only the first of a franchise chain.

The location--within a few blocks of major hotels, the Museum of Modern Art and the Moscone Convention Center--is ideal for tourists, who make up about half the current clientele. Business from locals has been increasing, especially during weekday happy hours.

About 60 percent of the wines hail from California, and 20 percent of the wine selections change every month. Another 21 options, which are not available in the dispensers, are poured by the glass at a black silestone bar; these include all the sparkling wines, which would go flat in the machines. The by-the-glass prices range from \$4 to \$25.

VinoVenue has no kitchen, so the menu is at present limited to prepared plates of salami, cheese and pâté. Customers are welcome to bring their own food and can purchase it at the deli next door.

The modern, sleek interior is dominated by the dispensing machines. If as a result the surrounding decor lacks some intimacy, the head-spinning array of options still leaves wine lovers feeling like kids in the proverbial candy shop.