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Unique Wines



Petra Cox displays a bottle of wine inside Mom's Apple Pie Shop in Occoquan {Photo by Mary Ann Kauchak/For the News & Messenger}

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Published: February 9, 2010

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By MARY ANN KAUCHAK

For the News & Messenger

Don't wait for your next sweet tooth to stop in at Mom's Apple Pie Shop in Occoquan. There's a well-stocked wine shop sitting inside away from the wafting smells of sugar and spice for you to discover. Twenty-five year old manager and wine consultant Petra Cox, is passionate about wine. When asked how she selects the wines that line the walls of her Commerce Street location, Cox responds, "I have to be in love with it; it has to be something special, an unusual varietal or a quality I've never found in another wine, even if it's being in love with the price. How could it taste this good for this price range?" she answers.

Wines from Argentina, Chile, New Zealand, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, Germany and

Austria as well as Virginia are represented in this diminutive 300 square-foot space. Over 200 wine selections were available the day I visited.

Mom's offers more than typical merlot, cabernet, shiraz, zinfandel and chardonnay, found in the wine sections of local supermarkets. When it comes to wine, "we have all the basics," Cox says, "but it tends to be the more unusual (wines) that people fall in love with."

"We try to look for a range of varietals because we want to show you that you have options," says Cox. "There are so many quality wines under \$15 if you want to be more adventurous. Try a Grenache; it's from Spain, it's under \$10 and it's fabulous!"

The wine-savvy manager boasts that wines costing more than \$15 in her shop are going to over represent themselves. "We're not going to have a \$30 cab (cabernet) that tastes like a \$30 cab. We're going to have a \$30 cab that tastes like a \$60 cab."

Don't be fooled by her youthful charm. The svelte 25-year old had her first taste of wine education during a college semester studying abroad in Italy. Taking her studies in Tuscany very seriously, she proclaimed, "I was in love with how Italians approach food and wine. It is such a part of the quality of life, and their approach to life is enjoying food and enjoying wine and having that be a part of each day."

Continuing her wine training and education, Cox completed classes at the International Sommelier's Guild in Arlington. The highly academic, rigorous course of study taught her the geography and history of winemaking. Blind tastings trained her to compare and contrast wines from different regions around the world.

Cox works closely with her distributors, attending regular wine tastings sponsored in area restaurants and wine warehouses. She's opened accounts just to accommodate requests from her wine patrons.

Last spring, Cox worked as a harvest intern at Cooper Mountain Vineyards in Beaverton, Oregon. Her duties included hands-on labor as well as critical lab testing to measure acid and sugar levels in the grape juice. These precise calculations influence how the winemaker approaches a specific vintage.

"My wine-making journey is not over," she says. In the future, Cox plans to study in New Zealand.

She also has close ties with wine makers in Virginia. Her uncle, Ben Renshaw, collaborates with popular wine maker Doug Fabboli of Fabboli Cellars in Loudon County making Bordeaux varietals. Their wines are frequently featured on Mom's free tasting bar.

Beer drinkers take heart; Valentine's Day is for you, too. Wall coolers filled with nearly 50 beer offerings are on site for your choosing. "Our beers contrast with our wine selections because they are all made in the United States," says Cox. "Delaware, California, Washington, Michigan—the U. S. is really experimenting when it comes to beer."

Beer sales at this quaint location have increased measurably in the past months due to the efforts of Mom's beer consultant Chris Taylor.

"The thing about a big box store for wine," Cox says in closing, "is that sure they have everything, but it's left to the consumer to cull out what's good from what's bad in order to get the cream of the crop—we've already done that here."

"If you find a \$7 wine, it's not going to be a toss-up. It's going to be a good \$7 bottle of wine—if it's a \$30 bottle of wine, it's going to be an excellent \$30 bottle of wine. That's the difference."

Mary Ann Kauchak lives in Lake Ridge. Her third cookbook, "SHORTCUTS, TOO" is available at Mom's Apple Pie in Occoquan. She can be reached at makauchak@comcast.

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