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Americas Best Value Inn

Virtual Sommelier Advances in technology helps take the mystery out of wine. Wednesday, January 05, 2011

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Wither Hills Sauvignon Blanc (2 of 2)

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Here's a quick fact: more people own a smartphone than a subscription to Wine Spectator magazine.

So when hotel and restaurant patrons want to enjoy a glass of wine but aren't familiar with a brand, varietal or year, it makes sense that they would turn to their phones for help.

Making that process easier is Cellar Key, a technology that allows people to scan a 2D barcode to access information about a wine.

"Wine as a subject matter can be intimidating, and people don't want to ask questions," said Luke Higgins, Regional Sales Manager - Atlantic for Lion Nathan USA, an owner and importer of wines that launched the proprietary marketing platform in September. "This is one of the most exciting opportunities to communicate with consumers and give them the message we've always wanted to, from our cellar door."

Smartphone users can download an app (Cellar Key uses ScanLife) and start scanning the barcodes, or tags, as they're also called.

After scanning a Cellar Key barcode, viewers have a variety of information at their fingertips: a video tour of the winery, accolades from wine publications, an introduction to the winemaker and suggested food, wine and cheese pairings.

The idea is to convey to consumers at the point of purchase -- at a restaurant, on a room service menu or in a wine shop -- information about viticulture and other characteristics about a wine.

Historically, wineries offered case cards or a blurb on the back of the bottle and enterprising wine buyers could visit a winery's website -- but that may not be practical for a consumer ready to make a purchase. A sommelier is a great resource, but one is not always available, particularly for room service orders or wine purchased from a hotel market pantry.

Cellar Key is used at hotels including New York's Waldorf Astoria, the Marriot Marquis Times Square, Hilton New York, Crowne Plaza in Times Square, and the Hotel Valencia Riverwalk's Citrus restaurant in San Antonio, Texas.

Hotels decide how they want to market the program, but most use promotional tools such as hang tags on bottle necks, shelf talkers, case cards, brochures and tent cards.

The content is intended to educate, entertain and virtually connect the user to wineries. Imbibers can instantly rate the wine and share their experience on social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter.

Cellar Key features 20 wines and five wine brands including Wither Hills Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough, New Zealand; Argyle Pinot Noir and Vintage Brut from Willamette Valley, Oregon; St Hallett Faith Shiraz and Poacher's Blend from Barossa, Australia, and Argento Malbec from Mendoza, Argentina.

Ben Glover, the chief winemaker of Wither Hills in New Zealand, said the content in Cellar Key conveys important information about wine to buyers.

"The magic about Marlborough is its effervescence and fantastic acidity. It cuts through oil and butters," he said. "It's not just about the wine, but the pairing with the food."

For now, paper tags slip over the neck of Wither Hills bottles and instructions to buyers on how to scan them is on the back. Eventually, the tags will be incorporated into the bottle design itself.

Even though Cellar Key a consumer-facing technology, Higgins pointed out that it also can be used to educate hotel and restaurant staff about wines.

Controlling Your Pour

Promoting wine through technology is also a priority at Hyatt. At the Grand Hyatt New York, guests can experiment and educate their palate at “the Wine Gallery.”

The gallery, situated adjacent to the signature New York Central restaurant, features five interactive wine displays -- coolers that contain a bottle of wine and regulate the pour. Guests can purchase a card with a pre-loaded amount of money and taste any or all of the wines. The serving sizes range from a 1-ounce “taste” to a 3-ounce “half” and a 5-ounce “full.”

“There’s nothing better than having interactivity,” said Barry Prescott, Hyatt’s corporate beverage director. “Consumers want to be a part of the process.”

The dispensing machines are the WineStation from Napa Technolgy. An argon gas keeps the wines fresh, and the system keeps track of the level of the bottle and shows the operator when the bottle was opened -- although the guest does not see the date.

“As an operator we love it because it eliminates waste,” Prescott said.

Prescott said guests can get creative with the system. They can stick with small pours to get an overview of world wines, or have a small taste of an exclusive wine.

Guests can choose flights or taste a wine before making the commitment to buy an entire bottle. They can also order food to enjoy with their wine.


“It allows them to experience a wine they haven’t before,” said Jose Montalvo, the hotel’s beverage director. “We want to demystify the wines.”

It’s user-friendly for the operator, too, he noted. It’s easy to replace empty bottles of wine, or swap a low performer for a more popular varietal. He updates the wine list via computer or can scan a barcode at the station.

The Grand Hyatt New York is the first Hyatt to use the system.


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