

WINE □ a timely investment

By Joan Boram
special writer

YOU PROBABLY could be a successful wine merchant if you weren't didactic, but it isn't likely. Certainly, the volatile Merchant of Vino, Ed Jonna, and the silver-tongued Tim McCarthy, of the Eastern Market's Cost Plus Wine Shoppe, are adept at giving the impression that you are doing them a favor by asking questions about wine.

Both Jonna and McCarthy see themselves as primarily educators. "I'm here to answer questions," said McCarthy in his genial brogue. "I love to talk about wine. I'll talk all day, if a customer is interested."

And Jonna admits he would rather preside over a wine tasting than deal with a "money-is-no-object" wine customer.

"It's just more rewarding to see people discover the pleasures of fine wine. My wife (Juliette, of Juliette's Cusine) and I offer wine-and-food tastings for private parties. After the hostess selects the foods for the seven-course dinner, I select the appropriate wines. At the tasting, we compare champagnes of the world, several red and white wines, and dessert wines. By the end of the party, guests have tasted 24 wines and know their background and characteristics. They are in the top two percent in the United States as far as wine knowledge is concerned, and they're eager to know more."

"**THERE ARE VERY few** gifts that will enhance everyday living for a longer period of time than a wine tasting given by an expert who shares not only knowledge, but enthusiasm."

— Ed Jonna,
Merchant of Vino

"Wine is a time machine." He continues. "Nothing else can take you back 40 or 50 years like a fine aged wine can. Try eating a piece of fish that's been in the freezer for half a century! Wine is a living thing: it accents life."

Both men agree that a fine palate is made, not born. The problem seems to be that, whereas people who don't know much about art know what they like, they are reluctant to have an opinion about wine. Seeing is more democratic than tasting.

"Go to a shop ... Cost Plus, Merchant of Vino, Cloverleaf, Gibbs, Boettel's — where they have qualified people who have tasted the wines they stock," said McCarthy. "A reputable shop will only buy good vintages, so you can hardly go wrong. The secret is to ask questions."

MCCARTHY'S ADVICE makes sense when you consider that, typically, Cost Plus carries some 2,000 different wines at any given time. So don't be shy, speak up. Pick a quiet time, probably not a Saturday afternoon, and allow yourself to become educated in one of life's pleasures.

All right, so you're educated. You're educated to the stage where your palate is ahead of your pocketbook. You've begun to snub old friends who still drink wine coolers. Now what do you do?

The first thing you do is develop patience. Buy a few cases of reasonably priced wine every year, put them in the cellar, or a cool closet, and forget about them for a few years. Voilà! In a few years that \$8 bottle of Cotes de Rhone is a \$40 bottle of wine — assuming you can find it at any price!

"I recommend a five-year

interval for wine," said McCarthy. "Aimed wines are made for too young in this country. The only way is to allow them to mature gradually in a cellar. The ideal temperature is 60 degrees, 65 degrees, which allows the wine to mature gradually. If it's too cold, the wine will stay immature. Wine matures from the outside in — the bigger the bottle, the longer it takes to mature."

Don't remember, you're not taking mutual funds here. The idea is not to sell them in five years and get rich, but to drink them in 10 years and feel rich. What McCarthy calls price-quality ratio. "The investment is in the pleasure of drinking the wine."

TO DEMONSTRATE THE virtue of patience, McCarthy has sold two bottles of Spanish wine, vintage 1964 and 1974. He's picked up in a close-out at a Chicago for \$1.99. He's put in the basement and has let it sit for about 10 years. "They were fantastic. I don't know now about wines, but they had matured into \$40 bottles."

Jonna feels so strongly about allowing wine to mature that he won't even let you buy a \$105 bottle of 1986 Chateau Mouton Rothschild unless you promise not to drink it before 2001.

If you want to pamper someone special, like yourself, in the Merchant of Vino's The Month Club. There are two categories. The Enthusiast and The Advocate, and membership can be for six months or one year. A bottle of wine selected by Jonna and the "Board of Selectors" is delivered to the door every month, and members receive the club's monthly newsletter.

"Notes" describes the month's selection, and also explores issues in the world of wine appreciation — articles ranging from how to build a wine cellar to planning a trip to the wine country.

Finally, the newsletter for a time gift for a wine aficionado, the Birmingham Beer Store has two elegant volumes on wine that would cheer up "The Sotheby World Wine Encyclopedia," by Tom Stevenson, \$40 and Hugh Johnson's "World Atlas of Wine," \$45.

THE NUMBER OF really good wine stores in the area is a tribute to the taste and sophistication of the citizens of Greater Detroit. "Very few cities in the United States have the number of fine food and wine stores that the Detroit area has," said Jonna. "Wine makers all over the world recognize this, and they bring their wines here to sell."

McCarthy concurrs. "I don't have to go to France. Everything worth buying comes to Detroit."

McCarthy and Jonna differ over whether 1989 will likely to be a good year or not. McCarthy doubts it. "They had our summer of 1988 — extremely hot and dry. The grapes had to be harvested three weeks early. A good wine requires a balance between fruit acid and tannic acid. Extreme heat cooks the grapes, making such a balance unlikely."

Jonna agrees with the predictions that 1989 will be a good year, but, "You'd better check with your actualist before buying any. If it's five years before it gets here, and another 10 or 15 years before it will be drinkable."

How to start good wine cellar

TO HELP you get your cellar started, Tim McCarthy has compiled a list of moderately priced (\$8-\$15) red wines that, properly stored, will greatly enhance 1995. They are generally available, but if you can't find these specific labels, a knowledgeable merchant will help you find comparable vintages.

- Cotes du Rhone — 1985
- Wyndham Estate Cabernet Sauvignon — 1986
- Franciscan Oakville Estate Cabernet Sauvignon — 1986
- Barbi Rosso di Montalcino 1986
- The Cutler Cellar Cabernet Sauvignon — 1985
- Rutherford Ranch Merlot — 1986
- Marquis de Caceres Rioja 1985
- Torres Coronas — 1985
- Montagne St. Emilion Chateau la Fleur Grandes Landes — 1986 (Note by McCarthy: A great year could be a 1961 or a 1945. This one will last forever.)
- Chateau les Prades Medoc — 1986

JOAN BORAM

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