

Veni, Vidi, Viticulture: Tastings of the Town

From 8-week course to casual evening, opportunities abound

By Charlotte Eichna

Wine-making has improved significantly in the past 30 years, says Kevin Zraly, author, teacher and entertainer, and it's a great time to learn more about a magnificent libation that dates back to Neolithic times.

This may not be the Napa Valley, or even Long Island for that matter, but there are plenty of places to bone up on Burgundies in New York City.

"It's unbelievable. There's not a lot of plonk out there," Zraly said of today's vintages.

Zraly has been teaching the Windows on the World Wine School for more than a quarter of a century. The school has graduated more than 14,000 students and has been booked up the past 15 years. Each eight-week session - taught in the fall, winter and spring - is filled with roughly 125 students.

"I don't advertise. I don't even take credit cards," said the teacher, who has a degree in education and

has traveled to all the major wine regions of the world in pursuit of his passion.

Classes are now held at the Marriott Marquis, on Broadway and 45th Street, but they originated, of

oldest wine store in America (it's been operating since 1820), and his nephew operates a wine auction house.

Tasters Guild members range from wine experts to neophytes and are of all ages. Kapon insists that "we're not a singles club," though he concedes that some people have met their future spouses at tasting events.

A typical tasting begins with 30 minutes of mingling, in which students sip aperitifs and chat. A speaker follows, then wine samples, with bread and cheese as palate cleansers. After a question-and-answer period, the evening winds down over casual wine sipping. It's about two hours, start to finish.

The next event, "Piedmont Wines of Batasiolo," is scheduled for Oct. 14, at the Hotel Shelburne on Lexington Avenue and 37th Street. Visit www.tastersguildny.com for more information.

Bistro Ten 18, at 1018 Amsterdam Ave. and 110th Street, also stages monthly tastings, usually on the third or fourth Monday. Co-owner Craig Skiptunis started the events about 1 1/2 years ago with the intent of educating his clientele about the restaurant's wine list.

"We have about 100 wines on the list, so it can get a little overwhelming," Skiptunis explained.

As a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Skiptunis was required to take various wine courses. In one class he traveled to California for about seven weeks to study viticulture.

"Once you fall in love with wine, you can't get enough of it, you can't stop reading about it," he says, explaining how he came to be a wine expert.

Classes are limited to 22 students, and often fill up quickly, so Skiptunis recommends booking about a week ahead of time. They are casual, less structured affairs, so that students of all levels will feel comfortable. Skiptunis will start by explaining a bit about a particular wine, then offering samples. If participants want to know more, they can ask questions. He says this technique also ensures that the better versed participants needn't endure lectures on basic information they already know.

"We find that a comfortable, informal setting really cultivates people's excitement more," he said.

Bistro Ten 18's demographic is very mixed. A mother and daughter frequently attend, as do older and younger professionals. At \$24.50 in advance, \$28.50 at the door, it's accessible to most budgets - particularly when you're guaranteed at least a dozen wines, plus some hors d'oeuvres.

Most people can enjoy a good glass of wine on their own, but Skiptunis thinks that adding a social dynamic is what really makes for a good time.

"There's nothing better than breaking out that special bottle and sharing it with someone," said the chef. "That's what makes it great."

Call 662-7600 or visit www.bistrotten18.com for more information.

"Once you fall in love with wine, you can't get enough of it."

*Craig Skiptunis
Owner, Bistro Ten 18*

course, at the World Trade Center.

At \$895 a pop, this wine education is clearly for those with a healthy disposable income, but Windows promises that students will taste more than \$3,000 worth of wine in the eight classes.

Zraly guessed that the average age of students was 35, with outliers in the 20s and 70s. One gentleman in the last session was 82. The enrollment is comprised of everything from company presidents to firefighters to cooks, but they have one thing in common: Each wants to become a more educated wine buyer, both at liquor stores and in restaurants.

If you can't afford to train with the author of the number-one selling wine book (also called "Windows on the World Complete Wine Course"), consider the New York chapter of Tasters Guild International, "the largest wine and food education society in the United States."

A yearly membership costs \$30 and the tasting events typically run from \$45 to \$130. Nonmembers can attend as well, for a slightly higher fee.

Ron Kapon, who lives on West 79th Street, is the regional vice president of Tasters Guild. Kapon maintains its Web site, which has scads of viticulture links - and he's personally checked out all of them. He teaches wine courses at various area schools and is co-host of the syndicated radio show "The Wonderful World of Wine & Spirits."

Kapon says he's from "the first family in wine education." His brother owns the wine store Acker, Merrall & Condit on West 72nd Street, said to be the