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P.O. Box 1676
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Toll Free: 877.781.7067
Fax: 214.722.2313

E-mail: info@friscostyle.com
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HALL Wines
photo by Chris Fritchie



The Art of Wine Tasting

By DeAnn Daley Holcomb

THERE IS A TRICK to the craft of wine tasting. Learning how to cultivate your ability to smell and appreciate a good wine has gained momentum, especially after the release of the award-winning Hollywood movie *Sideways*, about two guys who journey through the California wine country, one friend hoping to teach the other the art of wine tasting.

In true Hollywood fashion, the men discover two fascinating women resulting in a wine tasting marathon that labeled pinot noir as the premier wine to drink.

"It started with the movie *Sideways* because it opened the doors for wine itself and brought the pinot noir wine into the mainstream. And over time it has brought more exposure to the different elements of wine," said Chris

Gangi, owner and proprietor of the newly opened Josephine's Wine Bar & Bistro in Frisco. "I also think the quality of the wine is so much better with the changes the Italians have made and the tremendous improvement in wines from Napa Valley, Oregon and other places across the country."

Wine language is in a world of its own with winemakers, wine tasters and wine drinkers, each using their own terminology that has been developed over the years.

Simple rituals and learned wine etiquette surrounding wine tasting can be quite an enjoyable affair once the cork is pulled.

One-time ambassador to Austria, vineyard owner and wine connoisseur

Kathryn Hall is thrilled about the growing interest in wine and wine tasting events that are being held more frequently at restaurants, vineyards and at "wine tasting" parties.

"I love it," Ms. Hall said. "It is wonderful. More people drink wine and are learning about it and the many changes surrounding different wines. The atmosphere in a room comes alive as people talk about the many smells, the taste and sensations they are feeling."

Ms. Hall and her husband, real estate and financial investor Craig Hall, own HALL Winery and numerous vineyards in Napa Valley, California, where they plant and grow grapes to produce fine wines, specializing in Bordeaux varietals which include cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and sauvignon blanc.

"Wine is about the grape and in the grape business the land is so important," Ms. Hall said.

The Halls divide their time between their vineyards in California and their financial company here where Hall Financial Group is headquartered in Frisco's Hall Office Park. The Halls began acquiring wine properties in 1995 including part of the Sacrashe Vineyard in Napa, a 185-acre vineyard on Napa's Silverado Trail, the T-Bar-T Vineyard in Sonoma, a vineyard on Napa's Atlas Peak and the St. Helena Napa Valley Co-op.

When Ms. Hall talks about wine and her vineyards, you can see and feel her passion for wine by the expression on her face. But she is no stranger to the wine industry. As a teenager, Ms. Hall grew up on a ranch in Northern California where in 1972 her parents, her father a pharmacist and her mother a teacher, left their careers to join the winemaking

business and began growing grapes and producing wine.

"I love the wine and vineyard business and my passion is viticulture," Ms. Hall said. "Having grown up in the wine business, I consider myself a farmer and I understand why viticulture is so important to making wine. Craig loves it almost as much as I do. He said it is the only business he has entered where he didn't have an exit strategy already in mind."

The Hall's wanted to concentrate on producing cabernet sauvignon and Ms. Hall said she believed the only place they could accomplish that goal was in Napa Valley.

"I think almost everyone will agree that the cabernet sauvignon is what Napa Valley is known for and I think it is the finest wine making place in the world," Ms. Hall said.

She adds, "It's a combination of grapes, sun and size. That's the reason why great wine comes from Napa Valley. All of our grapes are estate-grown. We do sell our grapes to other vineyards."

Ms. Hall said there are certain techniques that enhance the tasting experience and she thoroughly enjoys educating the newcomer to wine or tasting and sipping wine with the experienced wine drinker.

"At the end of the day what goes into your decision to buy a wine makes it beautiful and very personal," Ms. Hall said. "Celebrating something with other people, that is what wine does, it brings people together."

Ms. Hall recently shared her expertise on wine tasting from her Frisco office at the Hall Financial Group. On the table in



Kathryn Hall

photo by Chris Fritchie

her office were three HALL wines, the Kathryn Hall Cabernet Sauvignon, the HALL Napa Valley Merlot and the HALL Sauvignon Blanc.

Ms. Hall believes wine tasting should be enjoyed and savored, free of tension and intimidation from any wine experts.

"Once you drink more wine you learn the vocabulary and it helps you identify the flavors in a wine," Ms. Hall said. "There is no right answer as to what you taste in a wine and there is no right answer concerning wine you like. You will find that the more wine you drink the more interesting it becomes and you will want to venture out and try a different wine."

Preparation is the key to success for a wine tasting. The main ingredients

involve, first, deciding what kind of wine or wines you want to test, popping the cork and picking out the right kind of wine glass for your venture. Next you need to check the look of the wine and then pour the wine in your glass. There is the sniff, the swirl of the wine in the glass, and last of all, the sip. Just remember, according to Ms. Hall, the wine tasting ritual involves look, sniff, swirl and sip.

Ms. Hall said if a cabernet sauvignon wine is part of the wine tasting affair always open it first.

"The reason I open the cabernet first is that the grape is more complex. It needs to breathe in order to release its many scents and flavors," Ms. Hall said.

The initial preparation involves the size of the wine glass, since wineglasses come in all shapes and sizes. Many wine

connoisseurs recommend a tulip shaped glass that is industry standard for either red or white wine. Ms. Hall prefers a larger, wider mouth glass when drinking the red wines.

"A bigger glass for the red gives you more opportunity to play around with the wine," Ms. Hall said. "You can swirl it around, looking at the color and releasing the flavors. It is easier to get the full array of scents from a wine when you use a large glass that curves in slightly at the top. Red wine in general has a lot more to consider in the nose than a white wine, although there are certainly many exceptions to this rule."

Now that the cork is out and the glasses are clean and ready, it is time to pour. Simply, pour some wine into

a glass, no more than a third full, hold the glass by the base, tilt the glass away and look through the wine, checking for clarity and color.

"It is best to taste white wine first before you taste the red wine because the red can overwhelm your senses for the more subtle whites," Ms. Hall explained. "When you lift the glass up to check the wine, a white wine should be clear and sparkle. If it is a dark gold it is either old and perhaps wonderful, or perhaps damaged in some way."

As you hold the glass up by the base, swirl the wine around a few times and then take a big sniff. This is the area where wine writers and website wine bloggers use thousands of words to describe the aromas released by different wines from soft and fruity to cherry, oak, blackcurrant and chocolate.

"Smell it, your nose is above your mouth for a reason. The scent of a food or a wine affects how it tastes to you. Swirl the wine in the glass, smell it, swirl it again to make sure the aroma has been released and smell it again," Ms. Hall said. "Drink it and hold it in your mouth before you swallow. Let it linger in your mouth."

You will find that the more wine you drink the more interesting it becomes and you will want to venture out and try a different wine.

As your wine tasting experience continues after the swirling, smelling and sipping, wine experts say to think about the sensations you taste and smell. Consider if the description on the back of the bottle matches the tastes, smells and sensations you felt as you drank your wine. If you are a first-time wine taster, you might feel intimidated by hearing words like "soft, fruity with cherry and blackcurrant," but Ms. Hall suggests you relax and enjoy your wine. Learning the vocabulary will come.

"One of my favorites is the merlot," Ms. Hall said as she slowly sips her HALL



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Napa Valley Merlot. “Merlot should be soft, you want to linger with it and have it be vibrant. No need to worry, you’ll discover and learn the vocabulary once you distinguish the aroma.”

Opening another of her signature wines, Ms. Hall talked about her time in Vienna as the United States Ambassador to Austria, appointed by then-President Bill Clinton. She has had a distinguished career as a successful businesswoman, community activist, attorney and ambassador.

“It was an unbelievable experience and changed forever a piece of the lives of all of us, my husband, children and myself,” Ms. Hall said. “As proud as I have always been of our country, having the awesome honor of representing the United States in the international diplomatic community made me more proud than ever to be American. Our commitment

to democracy and individual liberties combined with our financial and military strength places us in a unique position. The world looks to us for leadership.”

But she never forgot her roots that continued to be firmly planted in the wine business. Ms. Hall said tasting Austrian wine enhanced her ability to enjoy wine.

“When I lived in Vienna, I wanted to taste the local wine,” Ms. Hall said. “When I first tried Austria’s unique wine, its gruner veltliner, I did not like it. I thought ‘How can I live in a country where I don’t like the wine.’ For me, it



Photographer Fran Reisner with Cynde & Chris Gangi of Josephine’s photo provided by Fran Reisner



photo by Chris Fritchie

had a high acidic taste, but now it is one of my most favorite wines. Gruner veltliner changed my palate for white wine and, after being exposed to it, I consider it one of the world’s most beautiful and delicate wines.”

HALL offers wine tasting events and tours at its Napa Valley winery and they recently created a wine club and members receive bottles of wine every quarter.

“In the wine club we ship two bottles together for a reason so that the wine taster can try the two wines and learn to

distinguish the flavors of the various wines,” Ms. Hall said.

But you don’t have to travel to the California Wine Country to take in a wine tasting affair. More and more people are seeking out restaurants and wine bars to enjoy a variety of wines.

At Josephine’s Wine Bar & Bistro you can enjoy more than 40 wines by the glass from a cabernet to a merlot or the latest Sicilian wine and northern red and white wines.

“We offer what we call a ‘flight list’ of wines by the glass and there are six categories of white, seven categories of red and you can try three of those wines at one setting,” Mr. Gangi said. “The tasting menu allows you to go up and down the wine list and enjoy a cabernet from Argentina that is going to taste different from a California cabernet. It is a fun way to try different wines without spending so much money to enjoy them.”

A tasting card is a part of the wine tasting treat at Josephine’s.

“With each glass of wine you have a tasting

card and that describes the name of the wine and what characteristics you might savor from the wine like the aroma of vanilla or if it is fruity. I think it’s a fun way for people to enjoy wine and understand the complexities of wine,” Mr. Gangi said. “People are not as afraid of wine as they once were and are willing to explore and try different wines.”

Josephine’s also combines art with the art of wine tasting. The shop recently hosted a photographic art exhibit and wine tasting for Frisco photographer Fran Reisner.

Every Thursday night locals interested in trying new wines gather at the wine tasting affair at Corner Wines in Lakeside Market, owned by Lynda and Jim McDevitt. There's always a theme to the Thursday night event like "Mad about Merlot" in May, "Picnic Wines," in June and "Big Red's for Dad" for Father's Day. Inside there are more than 400 boutique wines to choose from. It is a casual, fun, neighborhood wine store.

"What it means by a boutique wine is not necessarily that it is expensive but that there are only a certain amount of wines produced, for example there may only be 800 cases available for that particular wine," Ms. McDevitt explains. "I have seen an increase in the interest in Spanish wines and I don't know if it is because we promote them and enjoy them but people, as far as our establishment, seem to enjoy the Spanish wines, especially the red wines."

Another contemporary trend involves matching your wine with food whether at your home dinner party or dining out. Local newspapers and magazines are filled with stories on matching wines with

food.

"The first wine I ever made was a sauvignon blanc," Ms. Hall said. "It is refreshing and it appears to be sweet because of the fruitiness. I would serve it with food that has a delicate or subtle taste to it. It is so easy to do the research now about what wine goes better with what food, but it is also a lot of fun to just experiment."

Ms. McDevitt agrees and thinks people are becoming more educated about wine and looking more closely at what they are serving with the wine.

"I have customers come in now who don't want just any chardonnay but ask for the different blends from Oregon or California. My customers seem more curious to try different wines and then try hors d'oeuvre to go with the wine," Ms. McDevitt said.

No matter if it is a sauvignon blanc or merlot, be sure to enjoy, savor and remember the taste because you only have one chance to capture the moment.

DeAnn Daley Holcomb is a freelance writer living in Plano.



photo by Chris Frichie



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