
WINES & VINES

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Wine Country Gets Downtown Address

Eight Northern California wineries open tasting room at Press Club

by Kate Lavin



Patrons are encouraged to visit the food and wine bar, which offers cheeses and small bites, along with various flights, such as samples of California white wines and high-end reds.

San Francisco -- Tucked into an expansive, subterranean space beneath the Four Seasons hotel, its entrance situated on a pedestrian pathway often used by city dwellers making a mad dash for a film at the Metreon, the newly opened Press Club at last is making its clandestine presence known. The winery tasting room opened its doors Sept. 10, generating buzz from websites and newsletters that cater to urban foodies and enophiles.

"These are the wineries that built wine country," Jan Wiginton, co-founder of the Press Club, said of the eight member wineries pouring at 20 Yerba Buena Lane. Each of the Press Club's founding member wineries inked a five-year lease for the sleek 9,000-square-foot space in downtown San Francisco, a testament to their confidence in the project--the first of its kind in the city.

Staffed by the wineries individually, the Press Club is designed to give patrons access to a wine country experience without leaving city limits. Wineries pouring for consumers at the Press Club include:

Background

Andrew Chun hatched the idea for Press Club about four years ago, while he was an MBA student at Dartmouth College. He and Wiginton, a fellow San Francisco resident hailing from Texas, formed Taste Partners LLC, then joined forces with Millennium Partners, the property developer that built the Four Seasons.

Wiginton and Chun were inspired by San Francisco's iconic Ferry Building, which brings together artisan food producers such as the Hog Island Oyster Co. and Frog Hollow Farm. "We thought not a whole lot was lost in translation, so we could do the same thing for wine," Wiginton said.



Four wineries are represented at each of two tasting bays located on the lower level of Press Club in San Francisco.

Taste Partners handpicked the independent and boutique wineries based on their quality and diversity--both geographically and in terms of winemaking style. "As much as I love Napa Cabernets, we didn't want to have eight of the same winery. They all have a story to share with the San Francisco public and the visitors," Wiginton said, noting the medley of appellations visitors can choose from within each county represented. "A lot of them make fantastic Chardonnays, but if you were to do a comparison of Chateau Montelena and Mt. Eden, I think you would have completely different experiences" in terms of the taste and tasting room experience.

That one-of-a-kind experience is exactly what Press Club hopes to bring to customers of its San Francisco space. Most tasting room staffers have worked at their employer's original location and can knowledgeably answer questions about its history and winemaking.

Locals and visitors

In addition to serving as a bridge between wine country vintners and urban consumers, Yerba Buena Lane, where Press Club is located, was blocked off to traffic to serve as a

passageway between Moscone Convention Center, a popular location for out-of-town business travelers, and Union Square, the shopping hub of the city and home to many of the city's largest hotels.



A private dining room can seat 18 visitors at events such as winemakers' dinners and private parties.

Wiginton said that like other San Francisco residents, she often has out-of-town guests who get off the plane Friday afternoon saying, "Let's go to the wine country this weekend." But with all of the attractions San Francisco has to offer, Sunday evening often arrives without a trip to visit the multitude of vineyards and wineries sitting in San Francisco's backyard.

Press Club offers visitors many of the same features as brick-and-mortar wineries, including the availability of exclusive varietals not sold in stores, such as Miner's Rosato. Unlike a real wine country experience, however, patrons are encouraged to sample wine from a variety of winemakers. Upon arrival, customers trade a credit card for a "press pass," which can be used at the wine bar and the food/wine lounge. When checking out, the press pass provides a list of selections tried, and customers are encouraged to buy bottles of their favorite wines from the experience.

Business development

Construction for Press Club was complete in April, but licenses from the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control were slow in coming. The wineries currently pour at Press Club under the same type of licenses granted to on-site tasting rooms--meaning they can only offer tastes, not full wine by the glass. Tasting charges vary widely, from around \$2 to more than \$10. And while patrons are encouraged to buy bottles from their favorite Press Club wineries, bottles can't be consumed on-site--they must leave with the customers or be shipped to their homes.

The new Press Club plans to hold events such as winemaker dinners, and it is available for private parties. The retail wine store at Press Club is open every day at 11 a.m. Tasting room hours are: Monday-Thursday, 2-9 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Reach Press Club at (415) 744-5000 or pressclubsf.com.