

Let's Go To The BOP

Known as Brew-On-Premises (BOP), U-Brews, U-Vints or micro-wineries, these commercial alternatives to traditional home winemaking (and beer brewing) are taking the country by storm.

Amateur winemakers and even those with no winemaking experience at all can now take advantage of a growing trend and brew their own Grand Cru without ever leaving the comfort and safety of their Barcalounger.

Known as Brew-On-Premises (BOP), U-Brews, U-Vints or micro-wineries, these commercial alternatives to traditional home winemaking (and beer brewing) are taking the country by storm. Here's how it works: the customer selects the style of wine to be made, the BOP winemakers on staff select the grapes or juice and begin the winemaking process. Customers choose their own level of involvement and the BOP does everything else. The end result is a custom-made wine with personalized labels and supreme bragging rights.

Like anything else, custom-made wine is available at a wide variety of price points. At Crushpad in San Francisco, winemakers select grapes from the West Coast's top vineyards and produce the wine in barrel lots, so customers walk away with approximately 25 cases when the wine is finished. Barrel prices vary by vineyard, from \$4,500-\$9,900 (\$15-\$33 per bottle).

On the other end of the spectrum is Whitewater Winery in Harrison, Ohio, that makes wine in six-gallon lots, averaging between \$149-\$275 (\$9.99 per bottle and up).

As one might expect from the micro-brew model, customers can



choose from among a wide variety of styles. At Whitewater, for example, the following varietals are available: White Zin, Sauvignon Blanc, Barolo (Nebbiolo), Vieux Chateau du Roi (blend), Riesling, Malbec, Sangiovese, Montepulciano and Gewürtztraminer. Crushpad offers Grenache, Merlot, Petite Sirah, Pinot Noir, Sangiovese, Syrah, Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Marsanne, Pinot Gris, Roussanne, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier.

While U-Brews – the beer equivalent of a U-Vint – have been around in some form or another since the 1960s, the move toward BOP wines is a relatively more recent phenomenon, and one that is growing. According to John Kiedrowski, executive director of the Canadian Home Wine Trade Association, “The expansion from U-Brews to U-Vints, and the subsequent popularity of the latter, can be attributed to seven factors:

1 U-Vint facilities are less expensive to open and operate than are U-Brew facilities because U-Brews require more space for tanks and refrigerators.

2 The quality and cost of wine kits has improved substantially due to new technologies or packaging juices.

3 The operators of U-Vints identified a niche in the market consisting of people interested in making wine in their own homes with a minimum of cost and bother.

4 The operators were able to provide advice and expertise to customers on how to make their own wines. Many of the operators also educated the consumer about wine making (e.g., newsletters) and the different grapes used in wine making.

5 It was less expensive to make consumer-made wine than to purchase wine from a government store and the final product, if made properly, could be of similar quality to some commercially produced wines. An important point, however, is that customers continued to purchase wine from government stores, especially the mid- to upper-range priced bottle of wine.

6 Technological developments resulting in a more simplified process for making beer wort reduced the business opportunities for U-Brew operators. Wort could now be purchased from an operator holding a wort license or provided in packages to which the customer just added water.

7 The wider availability of commercially produced specialty beers, particularly with the growth of micro-breweries, meant that fewer individuals were interested in making their own specialty beers."

According to *The Nibble*, a gourmet food magazine and website, the "do-it-yourself beer and wine industry is approaching \$100 million in annual sales." Within three years, says *The Nibble*, Americans will consume nearly 3.8 billion bottles of wine annually, making the U.S. the largest wine-consuming country in the world and BOPs will be part of the mix.

"My first exposure to the wine-on-premises concept was during my honeymoon in Canada," said Patrick Higgins, owner of Whitewater Winery. "I visited wine-on-premises stores in

Indianapolis and Columbus and thought it would be a good idea to introduce the concept to Cincinnati."

Since launching Whitewater, Higgins has seen two more BOPs open in his area, a testament to the fact that demand for these services is growing.

At Whitewater, 80 percent of the wine bottled is produced by home winemakers. Part of the allure is the ability to create custom wines for special events, such as weddings, anniversaries, birthdays and other special occasions. Another part is the self-satisfaction that comes from hand-crafting one's own product.

"I think people who enjoy wine want to be part of the total experience," said Higgins. "I also feel that the majority of the wine drinkers are not really 'wine snobs' and are willing to enjoy wine regardless of where it comes from and how it is made. Good wine is good wine, regardless if it is from Napa Valley or Harrison, Ohio."

At the Spotted Dog Winery in Saline, Michigan, owner/winemaker John Olsen has seen a shift in his business. Fifty percent of his business used to be home winemakers and the other 50 percent was sales by the bottle. Now, only 35 percent are home winemakers and 65 percent is bottle sales.

"Once people try our wines they tend to become regular customers," said Olsen. "So our business is growing as more people find us. That's the great thing about wine. We have a number of good wineries in the area and people like to make little road trips to enjoy sampling different wines. They tend to frequent their favorites but they are also always exploring. There aren't many products you can do that with. The way I look at it, the more people enjoy drinking wine, the better it will be for all of us, so I encourage them to explore."

Wine from a kit?

Many BOPs also offer wine kits for their patrons. Wine kits contain all of the necessary ingredients to make high-quality wines, including printed directions. These are designed more for the hands-on home winemaker who

wants to do-it-herself without the assistance of a built-in professional staff. The per-bottle price is generally quite reasonable, ranging in the neighborhood of \$3-\$5. Wine kits have come a long way since the early 70s when juice concentrates ruled the market, producing weak products that tasted faintly of wine.

One of the biggest manufacturers of wine kits is Wineexpert, which produces more than 100 different types of wine kits. Its premium and ultra premium wine kits are made with varietal juice obtained from vineyards around the world to produce wines that will "satisfy the tastes of even the most discerning wine enthusiasts."

As proof of its ability to produce world-class wines, Wineexpert entered its wine made from kits in *WineMaker* magazine's International Amateur Wine Competition – the largest amateur winemaking competition in North America. Wine made from kits competed side-by-side in a blind judging across all categories with wines made from grapes and/or juices.

At the 2007 competition, wines made with Wineexpert's premium quality brands were awarded with 227 medals. This builds on the success enjoyed in 2006 when wines made with Selection, Vintners Reserve and Island Mist wine kits won 183 medals. In 2005, they were awarded 170 medals.

Whether you dream of making world-class wines in the basement, or supervising a Chardonnay for your son's wedding from the comfort of your Barcalounger, one thing seems clear – consumers are taking a serious interest in wine, from the ground up.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Barcalounger

Barcalounger.com

Crushpad

www.crushpadwine.com

Whitewater Winery

www.whitewaterwinery.com

The Spotted Dog

www.spotteddogwinery.com

Canadian Home Wine Trade Association

chwta.org
