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What's New in the Grapevine this week?

- **Art Walk June 14**
- **The Best is always the cheapest**
- **How to uncork a Champagne bottle**
- **What makes wine expensive?**

Bozeman Art Walk June 14

Every summer Bozeman hosts its downtown Art Walk on the second Friday of the month. We are afforded the opportunity to spend a leisurely summer evening marveling at the local artists and their works. Even if it is cool and gray, this is a great time to visit downtown with friends and family.

This month we will be at the new location for Miller's Jewelry. Not only is the Art Walk a fun time in itself, on this occasion we will be celebrating the new Grand Re-Opening of the new Miller's location at 35 West Main.

It is customary for the galleries and shops to offer wine and cheese during the Walk. While many of the other Art Walk locations offer wine, it is generally generic jug wine. That is not the case at Miller's! Cec and Jennie at Miller's are glad to have you come in and they want to be sure you are treated well. I have it on good authority that there will be 5 or 6 different Wine Gallery selected wines and one of the wines we pour will be French and bubbly to help celebrate the new venue.

Come into Miller's and look at their collection of artistic jewelry creations. Enjoy a glass of good wine while the most knowledgeable and experienced people in the jewelry business wait on you. The Art Walk officially starts at 6:00 PM June 14 so plan to stop in.

Make a night of it and plan some stops at Bozeman's best restaurants and watering holes after the Walk. Summer is the best time of year to enjoy your city and the cultural benefits that are our blessing.

The best is always the cheapest

A few weeks ago, we filmed a new TV ad and the first words of copy had to do with wine being fun and not intimidating. Before I owned the Wine Gallery, I would stand in front of the “wall of wine” in a grocery store not knowing where to start. I felt like I had to be like a certain British spy who can tell you the label and vintage of anything ever bottled. However, like for most folks, that just isn’t realistic. There are over 1600 labels at the Wine Gallery alone and another 58,000 available in the Montana market. We have labels written in Japanese, French, German, Hebrew, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese and that by itself can be intimidating and confusing. There are almost 150 grape varietals represented in our store and only the bravest of customers attempt to pronounce all of them.

Back when I was a wide-eyed consumer, I couldn’t hazard a guess on what would taste good with Blaufrankisch or what to serve with Muller-Thurgau. If you don’t have an idea either you can just relax. You don’t come to the Wine Gallery to impress us; it’s the other way around. It is our job to know all the different wines. It is our job to know the labels, the food pairings, the ratings and the taste profiles. Those resources are unmatched at any grocery or drug store in town.

Wonderful wines are available at every price point and we are here to make sure you spend your hard earned money on something better than a guess about what furry critter on the label means about what is inside the bottle. We can make good suggestions for your requirements for burgers on the grill or what to serve when your daughter (the princess) gets married.

I think it was Benjamin Franklin who observed that “the best is always the cheapest”. Part of being the best is knowing what YOU like and matching your wants and needs to the best wine available. Developing a relationship with the Wine Gallery and our staff will put the fun back in wine shopping and take intimidation out of the picture. Service is what we sell; wine is just the vehicle.

How to Pop a Champagne cork

Summer is a time for weddings and graduations so there is ample opportunity for cracking open a bottle of Champagne. Popping a sparkling wine cork is fun, but letting it fly with a bang is Hollywood gone bad. Like my mom used to say, “It’s really fun till someone puts his eye out.” Safety aside, it’s a waste of good wine. So how do you open a sparkling wine without making a mess?

- First, ensure the wine is 38 F. or just out of the fridge.
- Don’t shake the bottle (unless you just won a NASCAR race.)

- Carefully peel the foil to unwind and remove the wire cage that holds the cork in place. Just in case you are ever on Jeopardy!, that wire that holds the cork safely in place always has 7 turns. Make sure you get them all.
- Assuming you're right-handed, grip the bottle with your right hand and hold the cork tightly with your left, either bare-handed or using a cloth or paper towel.
- Here is the trick! Hold the cork steady while you gently twist the bottle.
- As you twist the bottle the cork will ease loose with a very soft hiss.
- And just like that you will find yourself holding the cork in one hand and an open bottle in the other.

What makes wine expensive?

You will often hear me say that good wine doesn't have to be expensive nor can you taste the price tag. We always seem to connect a higher price with a better quality product yet wine seems to have good examples at every price point. Modern wine making techniques and a growing market for wine have everyone looking for a great wine at a great price. So what makes a wine expensive or inexpensive?

Any wine maker will tell you good wine is made in the vineyard. That is: you cannot make good wine from bad grapes. (You can, however, make bad wine from good grapes). Great wines are made from grapevines from the best soil and from crops that have a limited yield. The smaller yield allows the grapes to concentrate the juices in fewer berries and the berries will ripen slower and more uniformly. Over-cropping (10-14 tons per acre) leads to uneven ripening resulting in weak unbalanced wine. In general, quality goes down as tonnage increases.

Concentrating the flavor in fewer grapes means that the varietal characteristics will shine through. Jug wines made in bulk from high yield vineyards generally make quaffable wine but I have a heck of a time figuring out what grapes they come from. My sister Jean used to refer to the flavor of red Jell-O as "general red". It had a generic taste; it didn't taste like strawberries or raspberries, it just tasted "general red". Inexpensive wines may say they are Merlot or Chardonnay but in most cases the flavors don't shine through. I classify them as "general red" and "general white". Typically, these wines aren't terrible but they aren't exactly shining examples of the varietal grape.

The wine business is very capital intensive. Good land for the best grapes is very expensive, upward of \$150,000 per acre. If you are only getting 4 tons of

grapes per acre and each ton makes 720 bottles, you can see how just owning the land adds to the cost. Last year California red wine grapes averaged over \$1000 per ton.

In addition, a new oak barrel to age a good wine in will cost about \$1100. I figure that will add around a dollar and a half per bottle. Now, pay all current expenses like rent, labor and utilities while the wine is aging in barrels and bottles and working capital is tied up for a long time. A winemaker may finally start to see something actually go into his bank account in 5-6 years.

There are several shortcuts for making wine cheaper. When I was working in California for a manufacturing company, our weekly truck came back from our plant in Oregon with a back haul of “cull pears” destined for a winery in Modesto. The cloud of fruit flies that came out of the truck and the trickle of pear juice leaking out the tailgate confirmed what the driver claimed. These pears were not good enough for fresh, frozen or canned product so they were sold by the truckload to wineries that make “jug” wines. In California, only 75% of the wine in the bottle must be from grapes so 25% can be fermented juice from any source.

Also in California, it is illegal to add sugar to fermenting wine grapes to increase the level of alcohol. It is legal however to reduce the percentage of alcohol by adding water. If a winery gets 720 bottles of wine per ton of grapes and makes a wine with 15% alcohol, adding enough water to stretch the batch to 800 bottles at 13.2% alcohol nets 80 bottles of “free” wine that can be sold at full price. When we consider that many jug wines are made in the 100,000 case lots that means 10,000 of those cases came from a garden hose and reducing the overall production cost substantially.

When you consider the price of land, the price per ton for good grapes, labor costs for vineyards, the harvest and for the workings of the winery it adds up pretty fast. In addition, wineries have costly equipment for labeling, filling, packaging and shipping. Overhead expenses including marketing, samples, research, and shipping costs also add to the price. Distributor and retailer mark ups must also be factored into the shelf price. When I see wines retailing for under \$7 (or even under \$4 like 2 Buck Chuck), I wonder what they started with and what is actually in the bottle.

From land prices, to intensive hand labor, to bottle prices and licensing, it isn't an easy job running a winery. Making great wine takes great care and great skill. It cannot be done without skill, capital, and luck. I hope we all appreciate what went into making that bottle of wine and how grateful we should be to those passionate individuals who make the best wine for us.