

A new way to drink the Bay Area's smallest indiewines is gaining momentum: tasting collectives

'Yogurt machines for adults' and other new business models allow multiple wineries to use one tasting room

By Esther Mobley, Tanay Warekar | July 18, 2021

The typical wine-tasting trip to Napa or Sonoma involves hopping from one winery to the next. Now, however, it's becoming easier to experience various wineries within a single tasting room, thanks to a surge in new collective spaces shared by anywhere from three to 25 individual brands.

These collective tasting rooms aren't a brand-new concept; Outland, Rebel Vintners, Vintners Collective and others have existed in Napa for a few years. But at least five new ones have opened during the past year, a reflection of how important tasting rooms have become to a small winery's business model. For vintners, these cooperative arrangements make opening a tasting room significantly more affordable in Wine Country's competitive real estate market.

For customers, it's a new way of tasting indie California wines in sleek, modern rooms near downtown Napa, Healdsburg and Sebastopol — without required reservations and with a more casual atmosphere that caters to locals more than tourists. One of the new entities, a 3-acre property called Bacchus Landing opening on Friday, is even targeting families with children by offering an artisanal food market, an herb garden and bocce ball courts.

"Wine can have the tendency of becoming not so approachable sometimes," said Monica Lopez, a co-founder at Bacchus and owner of Santa Rosa winery Aldina Vineyards. "We wanted to create all these different areas so everyone feels comfortable."

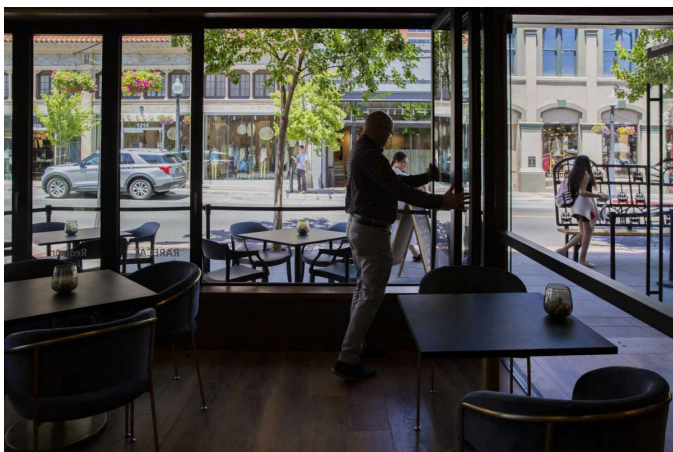


Mia Carta general manager Jim Foster, left, and Rebecca Sciandri Gri(n) of Sciandri Family Vineyards at their shared tasting room in Napa. Designed by INTERSTICE Architects.

Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

The uptick in collectives is partly a business decision. In the past, small wine brands could rely on selling to restaurants and wine shops, but these days, vintners say that having a place to host visitors is crucial. Direct-to-consumer sales now make up 72% of the average California winery's sales, according to a Silicon Valley Bank survey published in May. On top of that, direct sales are the most profitable way for wineries to sell wine, since they don't have to give a cut of the profit to a distributor, restaurant or retailer.

The cost of overhead required to run a tasting room, though, such as rent and staff, might not be worth it for small producers.



Jim Foster, general manager of Mia Carta, opens up the window panels. The Collective tasting room opened in June. Designed by INTERSTICE Architects. Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle



Mia Carta is home to six small wine brands, each of which is too small to have opened a tasting room on its own. Designed by INTERSTICE Architects. Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

Stephanie Mesher co-owns a wine brand, Essere, that makes just 500 cases of wine a year and “never really considered opening a tasting room of our own,” she said. Being part of a collective changed that. Along with five other small Napa wineries, she became a partner in Mia Carta, a stylishly decorated tasting room that opened in a prime spot on First Street in downtown Napa designed by INTERSTICE Architects, an architecture and interiors firm from San Francisco.

A three-dimensional map of the city of Napa spans an entire wall (“our Instagrammable moment,” partner Kim Bogner said), and visitors can taste a diverse range of wines from the six producers (Essere, Art

House, Ilisley, Rarecat, Redmon and Sciandri Family), from a \$30 Sauvignon Blanc to \$225 Cabernet Sauvignon.

“When we’re competing with wineries on mountains with views and caves, a space like this really helps us support one another,” said Elana Hill, manager of the Vichy Tasting Experience, a collective of three wineries located near downtown Napa. Her family winery, Prime Solum, is one of the three partners.

Other vintners simply wanted to be in a downtown area like Napa or Healdsburg because of the foot traffic, and teaming up made it more reasonable.

For years, winemaker Jason Holman was trying to get customers to come for a tasting at his Holman Cellars, located in an industrial park in an area of south Napa. “It was disheartening to see the amount of people driving by us and not even think about coming in for a tasting,” he said. In 2018, he cofounded Rebel Vintners with winemakers Kevin Cadle (Cadle Family Wines) and Tim Keith (Leaf & Vine). Now, with a location in the heart of downtown Napa, the three vintners say their partnership has boosted all of their businesses.

“Just being able to be in front of the masses in downtown Napa has been huge for all of our brands,” Holman said.

Not all Wine Country tasting room collectives are the same. At places like Mia Carta, Rebel Vintners and Napa’s Outland, visitors are invited to experience bottlings from all of the wineries at once. These tasting rooms emphasize the diversity of their offerings, geared toward a customer who wants to try a lot of different-tasting wines made by idiosyncratic winemakers. At Outland, a flight might start with Forlorn Hope’s Picpoul, a viscous white wine, from the Sierra foothills, then move to a Sonoma County Pinot Noir from Poe, then a savory Syrah from Farella’s estate in Napa.

Other collectives capitalize on the shared real estate but maintain distinct branding. At Vichy, each of the three wineries — Prime Solum, Jean Edwards Cellars and Bougetz Cellars — has its own tasting room. Vichy

evolved from a traditional tasting room belonging only to Prime Solum; it added partners to make better use of the space. They're like-minded businesses: all have a similar price point, with bottles starting in the mid-\$30 range and going to \$150.

Bacchus Landing, meanwhile, devised a hybrid model. Four of the eight wineries that make up this collective have their own tasting rooms, while the remainder share a fifth. "It's less about business survival and more about giving smaller wineries a consumer-facing location," said Lopez, who founded Bacchus with her brother Francisco.

Many collective tasting spaces are also going beyond just serving wine, like Bacchus with its sandwich and charcuterie-plate food market. The Lopez siblings hope to bring in food trucks in the future. Vichy, too, has a commercial food license, and another new collective in Healdsburg — a joint venture of Leo Steen and Rootdown wineries called the Drink — has parked a vintage espresso cart outside its doors.

"It's not that we expect people to go to all three tasting rooms in one visit," said Karen Troisi, co-owner of Jean Edwards Cellar at Vichy. "But if they do a tasting with us, they can head over to Prime Solum for some food after."

There's evidence that this collective tasting room model may grow. Case in point is Region, which opened in Sebastopol's Barlow complex last summer. It represents 25 Sonoma County wineries, which each pay membership dues and commissions. Its major point of differentiation is a massive, self-serve wine wall featuring machines that dispense 1-ounce, 2.5-ounce or 5-ounce pours of 50 different wines. Customers get a card, swipe it at the machines where they want to taste, then settle their tab before leaving.

At any given time, the wines available might range from Orsa's Pinot Noir rosé (\$22 per bottle) to Immortal Estate's Impassable Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (\$300 per bottle). Each winery signs a one-year agreement with Region. At the end of this year, four are expected to leave, and four new ones will come in, co-founder Kerry Thedorf said.



Wines from the six different wineries that inhabit the Mia Carta tasting room collective. Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

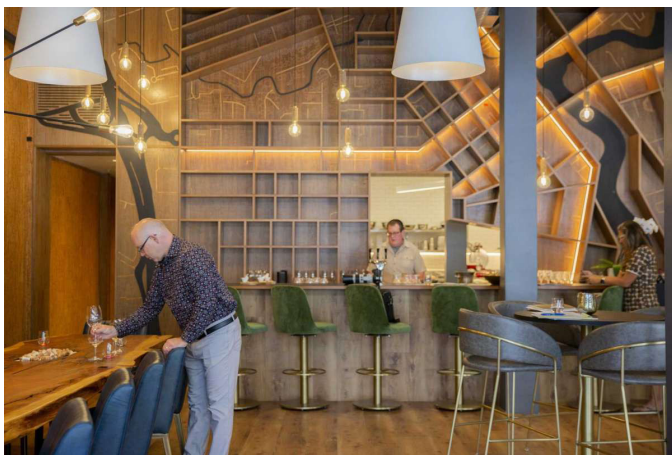


Mia Carta general manager Jim Foster, from left, Stephanie Mesher (Essere Wines), Sharon Kazan Harris (RARECAT wines), Dona Kopol Bonick (Art House Wines) and John Bonick (Art House Wines), at their shared tasting space. Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

The self-serve model is commonly seen at breweries, but rarely in wine-focused settings. "This is the soft-serve yogurt machine for adults," said Thedorf. Business at Region appears to be good — so good, in fact, that Thedorf and Eide plan to take the concept on the road. They plan to open a second location in San Luis Obispo in February, featuring wineries from Paso Robles, Edna Valley and other wine regions in San Luis Obispo County. Will there be further expansions beyond that? "Possibly," said Thedorf. "It's gotta be in a wine-growing region. It's not just a chain you can open anywhere."



Mia Carta's vintage Piaggio "Ape" food cart, which is stationed in the parking lot and occasionally goes on the road. Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle



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Hill, of Vichy, suspects the trend will catch on with customers in a big way. "There's infinite potential for this model," she said. "It allows people who are making small amounts of wine to connect with guests, and there's no pressure to sell or to answer to corporate folks."

What's more, at a time when more wineries are moving to appointmentonly tasting models, these collectives often eschew that trend. Instead of plotting out a tasting schedule, people can simply show up. That, winemakers hope, may make it easier for locals to make spur-of-themoment plans.

"At the end of the day, it's our local community that's going to create business for us," said Monica Lopez. "They will come here even during the winter months."