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MAGAZINE

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Life is a cabernet

Jersey's vino guru Gary Vaynerchuk on how to make wine the centerpiece of your table.

By **Jessica Kitchin** | Photographed by Steve Legato



Life is a Cabernet

Jersey's vino guru Gary Vaynerchuk on how to
make wine the centerpiece of your table.

Gary Vaynerchuk, a charismatic, high-energy, sports-loving guy in his early 30s, isn't your typical wine expert. Most would expect him to opt for a different alcoholic beverage—the kind frequently consumed from a can.

But at an early age, Vaynerchuk developed an interest in wine, which was sold in his parents' liquor store in Springfield. "People collected wine, and as a baseball-card guy, I understood that," he says.

Outside the Vines

There's more to a wine dinner than choosing red and white varietals. Setting a menu that lives up to the caliber of the wine is important. At the Fruited Plain in Pine Brook (thefruitedplain.com), catering manager Drew Gabbe says he envisions the presentation before he starts

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WHAT'S YOUR VINTAGE? Vaynerchuk embraces the wine culture—and opens it up to a younger audience

teenager, he started “training his palate backwards”—studying the flavors of fruits, grasses, and other subtle tastes frequently drawn from a sip of wine.

Taking the helm from his parents, who moved to New Jersey from Belarus in 1978 and opened Shopper's Discount Liquors in 1983, Vaynerchuk rebranded the store as the Wine Library in 1998 and started expanding the business, with a focus on wine. Today, the Springfield store (586 Morris Ave, Springfield; winelibrary.com) does more than \$50 million of business a year, much of it online, and keeps dozens of wine-savvy employees on staff.

Just as Vaynerchuk isn't your typical wine guy, his advice doesn't follow the mold. If someone asks for guidance while planning a party, he'll focus on the type of wine the person likes before talking about the menu. “I believe wine is a lot more flexible with food than people give it credit for,” he says. “I'm not a big fan of the rules—white wine with fish and red wine with beef. I think that's complete insanity.” In fact, at a tasting he hosted in New York, Vaynerchuk served wines in the \$200- to \$1,000-a-bottle range with foods such as White Castle sliders, hot wings, and Twizzlers. More than half of the guests told him it was the greatest tasting they'd ever been to. “Wine is obnoxiously flexible,” he says. “You just have to give it a chance, and most people don't.”

Vaynerchuk does have two main rules he asks wine drinkers to follow: trust your own palate (“Don't listen to Robert Parker or Wine Spectator or me or anybody,” he says. “If you like it, drink it. If you don't like it, don't.”) and try new things.

“Everybody's been to a dinner party with cabernet, Bourdeaux, and chardonnay, but how about a tannat? Or a verdejo? Or a Cahors? That's where I want to go.”



The wines Vaynerchuk is most excited about right now hail from Greece, Portugal, and Eastern Europe. “These are places that are going to mean something in five to ten years,” he says. “I like to

making a new dish, focusing on beauty in addition to flavors. “You want it to look nice and neat, but spend some time on each of the components,” he says. “You want to balance the colors and textures.”

As for wine storage, Cella Vino in Chatham (springstreetdezin.com) custom builds handsome wood cabinetry wine “cellars” that will move wine out of the basement. The glass-fronted display cases have soft lighting and multiple temperature zones that keep each bottle at its optimal climate.

Need a hostess gift? Vigneto in Weehawken (vignetowineandgifts.com) specializes in baskets that pair wines with gourmet items, including pestos, chocolates, and crackers. “It's about high-quality ingredients and tasteful packaging, with reusable tins and recycled wine crates as containers,” says Kim Cullen Black, a handbag designer who co-owns the store with her husband, a sommelier and former chef. “We put our skills together to and create something really outstanding.”



stay on top of the curve.” Tapping into Vaynerchuk’s latest wine musings isn’t difficult—five days a week, he posts a video blog on winelibrarytv.com in which he boisterously tastes wines from a specific region or variety and gives his (very blunt) thoughts. The ten-minute gonzo-style clips are reaching wider audiences, particularly twentysomethings who are new to the wine culture. And they’ve launched him into the

spotlight, with appearances on the Ellen DeGeneres Show and Late Night with Conan O’Brien.

Though the attention has given him a platform for talking about his passion, he hopes more than anything that it opens up doors in the way people think about wine. “It should be about exploring new things, breaking the rules, finding out what you like,” he says. “It’s a journey. Don’t let the rules slow you down.”

The Main Event

Vaynerchuk admits there are people who are too timid to try a new wine when the boss is over for a dinner party. “I respect that,” he says. But he disagrees with the logic. “So many people stick to the same three or four varieties—or even worse, the same producers. And there are a billion trillion different things to try out there.” If you talk with an expert in the Wine Library about something new and give that a whirl, he says, “you look smart, your guests will be happy, and it will be a totally different experience.”

For this entrée, a jerk-barbecue pork loin with a Jamaican pulled-pork spring roll, sweet potato hash, and snow peas, Sitomer chose a 2004 D’arenberg D’arry Original Shiraz/Grenache. “With this highly characterized entrée I wanted a red with a food-friendly flavor profile—solid fruit, not too much oak, not too big and overwhelming for the meal,” he says. “The D’arry’s Original is medium in body, silky, and has a bit of spiciness that I thought would jive with the pork presentation.” As far as trying different wines with dinner, Sitomer says variety is the spice of life. “If you are enjoying the way a dish and wine pair up, there’s no need to switch,” he says. “But I love experimenting with different wines with the same food. Your experience with the wine changes, your



A medium-body red goes with this flavorful pork



Start from the Top

In Vaynerchuk’s mold of “no hard and fast rules,” Matt Sitomer of the Wine Library doesn’t always stick with the common white-before-red wine-pairing advice. “In some respects, an appetizer wine is like the actual appetizer—it wakes you up and prepares your palate, doesn’t fill you up or knock you out,” he says. “But if you are in the mood for a big California cab when the appetizer is being served, go for it.”

In the case of this appetizer—a grilled vegetable and goat cheese tart with a truffle-scented asparagus and potato garnish—Sitomer went with a white: a 2007 Ranga Ranga Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. “It’s light and zesty with good acidity,” he says. “I thought it a natural match for the creamy goat cheese.”

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Sweet Endings

How do you choose a wine to conclude the evening? “Short answer, it’s not easy,” says Sitomer. “Sweet and sweet doesn’t always match. I often like to have a



dessert wine on its own or with a cheese plate, but a lighter Sauternes works great with fruity desserts.” In this case, he was asked to pair a wine with the Fruited Plain’s lemon brulee and poppyseed poundcake with fresh raspberries and sauce anglaise. Sitomer went with a 2004 Chateau Petit Verdrines Sauternes, which he says is “very refreshing and great to finish any meal. I thought it would pair especially well with the brulee in this dessert. It’s not too heavy or too too sweet, which can be a problem when pairing dessert wines with actual dessert rather than cheese.” He suggests experimenting with port wines or even the sweet reds from Rivesaltes once the chocolate comes out. But, as always, he sticks to the Wine Library rules of trusting your own palate and trying new things. “Experiment and see how it works for you.”

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