



Elevated Wine Tasting at Burgess Cellars

Napa Valley winery enhances hospitality to keep pace with consumer expectations

By Stacy Briscoe

In May, Burgess Cellars launched its new tasting experience, “Mountainside Tasting.” A seated experience that is literally elevated: The new Mountainside Tasting Room is perched 1,000 feet on the winery’s Howell Mountain estate in Napa Valley.

Elizabeth Miller, director of hospitality for Burgess Cellars, said the original “hospitality team,” when the winery first began to offer tastings after opening in 1972, was founder Tom Burgess. Guests would squeeze into one of the winery’s barrel rooms, where Burgess himself would pour a selection of current releases. “As Napa Valley wine tourism and Burgess Cellars grew, a few others joined Tom on the hospitality front through the years, but our tasting experience charmingly remained in that active barrel room,” Miller said.

It’s just within the last two years that the winery began focusing on creating better guest experiences. The “barrel room” transformed into the cellar tasting room (though still, indeed, an active barrel room used by the wine-making team), offering intimate by-appointment tastings that last about an hour.

“Recently, it became clear to us that Napa Valley and its visitors have evolved,” Miller said. “Gone are the days of 10 belly-up-to-the-bar tastings in a day ... Experiential and immersive-based wine tourism is the name of the game now — here in Napa and globally.”

The “Mountainside Tasting” now joins the “Tasting in the Cellar” as an appointment-based hospitality offering. The new 90-minute experi-

ence puts guests in full view of the Burgess estate vineyards. The extended time, Miller said, allows hospitality staff to have a real conversation with guests, immerse them in the winery’s story and “indulge the most curious of guests and the most wine-geeky questions.”

According to the Wines Vines Analytics winery database, Burgess Cellars produces around 12,000 cases per year of Syrah, Petite Sirah, Malbec and Petit Verdot. Miller added that, in the future, Burgess will be expanding to include Cabernet Franc and Zinfandel as well. The winery owns 60 acres of vines, and the average bottle price is \$50.

Wholesale supports DtC innovation

Miller said direct-to-consumer (DtC) sales make up less than 50% of Burgess’s sales, and the new tasting experiences are intended to boost those sales. She said that the successes that the winery has seen through distribution has served as a stable financial anchor, allowing for investment in the more innovative DtC approach.

Burgess staffs a small team, and Miller said she takes hiring and managing this team quite seriously. “As our experiences are intimate, and often nearly private, the wine educator is a crucial part of visiting Burgess Cellars,” she said.

Winemaker and general manager, Kelly Woods, often conducts what Miller refers to as “out of the box” staff training, taking team members on vineyard walks, barrel tastings and educating them about the estate’s Howell

Mountain fruit. “Kelly gives of herself constantly to the team, and this has allowed our team to really live what we do up here, and best share that with our guests,” said Miller.

What sets Burgess Cellars apart from other wineries in the area, Miller said, is the effort the hospitality team puts into communicating with their wine club members. “We are communicative with our members every step of the way,” she said, “from always informing them in advance of important dates, calling them throughout the year to check in and always being a very friendly and helpful voice on the other side of the phone.”

Tools of the trade

The Burgess hospitality team uses WineDirect to manage its POS/CRM, email and wine club. The glassware is Andrea Robinson’s “The One,” which Miller calls the perfect stemware that caters to the wide range of grape varieties Burgess produces, from Chardonnay to Petit Verdot to Cabernet blends. To keep that stemware clean, the tasting room team uses the Jackson Avenger glasswasher.

When asked about any standout design features in the new venue, Miller called out three educational artwork pieces located inside the tasting room. “Each piece highlights the defining aspects of our *terroir* and viticulture,” said Miller. “We use these eye-catching pieces as visuals with guests, so they can clearly see what’s happening on our mountainside grapevines from root to berry.”