



Sbragia Opens Lounge on Sonoma Plaza

By Stacy Briscoe

In the first week of September, Sbragia Family Vineyards opened its new tasting lounge at 520 Broadway on the Sonoma Plaza.

The city of Sonoma, Calif., enacted a moratorium on new tasting rooms in the Plaza in December 2017 that has barred any winery from being granted a license for a tasting room in the Plaza Retail Overlay Zone. Although the initial moratorium was scheduled to expire Sept. 30, a city council meeting held Sept. 24 resulted in a 4-0 decision to extend the moratorium for seven months, until May 1. “It is the city’s intention to complete the analysis and have final regulations in place by the first part of 2019,” stated the county clerk’s summary of the meeting.

But there’s a loophole: New licenses can be granted to businesses taking over a space previously occupied by a tasting room.

Sbragia’s new tasting lounge takes the place of Enkidu Wines, which has moved to its new location on Eighth Street East. “We consider ourselves lucky to have secured this spot with the ‘work around,’” said Sbragia’s sales and marketing manager, Audrey Posl. Despite some controversy within the community, Posl said Sbragia hasn’t experienced a lot of pushback. “We’re making a huge effort to be a fun experience and an event-centric community meeting spot, not just another tasting room,” she said.

Posl said the renovation and decoration — a “fresh, modern farmhouse look,” intended as a nod to the Sbragia family’s farming history

— was completed entirely by winery staff. “Our handyman spent days installing a corrugated tin ceiling, wooden backdrop behind the bar, sliding barn door and new light fixtures. Even our COO spent days painting walls,” she said.

Sbragia also operates a tasting room at the estate winery on Dry Creek Road in Geyserville, Calif. Owner Ed Sbragia founded his eponymous label in 2001, after 32 years as “winemaker” for Beringer Vineyards in Napa, Calif. According to the Wines Vines Analytics winery database, Sbragia Family Vineyards produces 16,000 cases annually from 52 acres of estate vineyards in the Dry Creek AVA.

Posl said one of the main motivators for opening this second, centrally located tasting room was to increase the winery’s direct-to-consumer (DtC) sales. “The majority of Sbragia’s business is DtC, and as a still-growing medium, we are hoping to increase the amount of wine club members and repeat customers to our two locations and website,” she said.

Since the opening of the Sonoma Plaza tasting room three months ago, Posl said, she’s already seen an increase in DtC numbers.

Posl said DtC best-sellers are slightly different than what’s popular at wholesale. “In our tasting room, guests like to seek out bottles they can only get at the winery, such as our Dry Creek Valley Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot and special-label bottles reserved for wine club like Nonno’s Zinfandel,” she said.

The two main wines found in distribution,

the Home Ranch Chardonnay and Gino’s Zinfandel, are less popular in the DtC market. “This is because we have a much broader selection of wines being sold (DtC) online as well as in the tasting room,” Posl said.

Currently, Sbragia’s Sonoma tasting room is staffed by two full-time employees. “We intentionally sought out people who already have a connection to the Sonoma Plaza community and wine scene,” Posl said. This, she said, has helped the brand build a foundation for outreach and authenticity.

Staff members are rewarded for club sign-ups and meeting DtC goals but are encouraged to ask for sales and wine club sign-ups in authentic, personal ways. “We learned some time ago that uniform scripts don’t work,” Posl said. “A satisfied customer telling 10 friends about their great time at Sbragia is just as valuable as a club sign-up.”

Tools of the trade

Sbragia uses eCellars as its point-of-sale system. Posl describes it as a full-service system that allows her and her staff to send emails and track club shipments. It also serves as a reservation calendar.

Upon opening the new tasting room, Sbragia invested in new stemware, the Stolze Revolution glasses. “We also do have some classic decanters but are still looking for some more interesting ones to display on our tables as a statement,” Posl said. 🍷