
Ann Arbor's Vinology changes, perseveres in a tough market

by Debra Jett

The Jonna family aren't quitters. Many would say that the extended family's businesses (Merchant's Fine Wines, Plum Market, Vino Wine Bars and the former Merchant of Vino) easily qualify them as southeast Michigan's first family of wine.

Ann Arbor's Vinology is one of two wine bars owned by the dynamic father-daughter duo of John and Kristin Jonna. (The other, Vinoteca, is located in Royal Oak.)

So when Vinology wasn't working right, instead of throwing in the towel they went back to the drawing board. They felt committed to their concept and were willing to keep trying different models until they got it right.

Recently departed: the former wine list, menu and executive chef. And with John Jonna playing master of ceremonies, Vinology invited in the media to talk about their new chef, sample their summer menu, and preview their wine offerings.

John Jonna explained Vinology's original concept as one of trying to make drinking wine an accessible, easily enjoyable experience -- and more approachable to its customers. The new focus gears more toward wine and food pairing.

He acknowledged major differences between the Ann Arbor market and their Royal Oak location. To sum up: Ann Arbor is an intellectual and cultural community that tends to analyze everything -- including the wines they drink.

That differs from Jonna's own philosophy, best paraphrased as, "If you like the wine, drink it and enjoy it for what it is."

He also observed that Ann Arborites "drink wine for everyday consumption" with their meals, while "in West Bloomfield, the customers are more apt to cellar their wine."

Since opening three years ago, Vinology has gone through several incarnations of its staff and -- especially -- wine list.

Kristin

Jonna said that she and former wine director Paul Hanna developed the original list -- a booklet tabbed into sections by "taste definition" icons -- to help customers, especially neophytes, bring the wine selection process down to earth. Kristin, a Certified Wine Educator, said a great deal of thought went into the taste definition concept.

(I confess to never really liking this approach, which seemed to dumb down the wine itself. I enjoy conferring with a sommelier or waitstaff for insight into a wine.)

The new wine list is compiled in a more sophisticated, if conventional, manner. Gone is the tabbed booklet. Definition icons are still around, but now located next to the each wine's listing.

Vinology's new food menu suggests wine pairings for small plates and entrees, something helpful even for wine geek customers. For non-geeks, this can reduce the time needed to peruse the wines -- or get a glass of wine in front of you while you cruise the list at your own pace.

Also gone is former executive chef Brandon Johns, who emphasized the "slow food" cooking style and had a small ownership stake. He arrived in May, 2008, and recently left to start his own restaurant, Grange Kitchen and Bar, a couple of blocks down the street.

Kristin Jonna explained that Johns embodied a very focused vision: a fine dining, white tablecloth experience. Unfortunately, she said, his tenure at Vinology coincided with the economy bottoming out, and didn't work well for either party.

New executive chef Robert Courser, recently of Birmingham's Chen Chow Brasserie, embodies the same vision for local ingredients, Kristin Jonna said, but also seems committed to the Jonna mission of pairing food with wine. With him comes James Wilhelm, also of Chen Chow, as executive sous chef; this may bring more harmony and consistency to the kitchen.

Kristin Jonna reiterates her father's sentiment on the difficulty of Ann Arbor's market. She says that Ann Arborites are incredibly loyal, with a great sense of community, and readily voice opinions on everything from the wine bar's name, food menu, and wine list to questions about why the Jonnas chose Ann Arbor as its site in the first place.

She acknowledges that they simply were not prepared for this type of reception.

Vinology continues to try to capture a diverse group of customers. Kristin Jonna says she'd like Vinology to be thought of as a wine-friendly establishment offering world cuisine, while providing education in a fun and unobtrusive manner.

Vinology currently offers just a few Michigan wines on its list of 150: M. Lawrence Sex, Left Foot Charley Pinot Blanc, Black Star Farms Cabernet Franc, and St. Julian Cream Sherry. Kristin Jonna says she typically adds more Michigan wines on the Fall menu, and promotes Michigan Wine Month in April with several tastings.

After three years, it's still uncertain how long it will take Vinology to get its groove on in Ann Arbor. John and Kristin Jonna clearly have the tenacity and financial wherewithal to continue backing the business; what's still uncertain is when -- or whether -- they've stuck around long enough and made the right changes for Ann Arbor to give up its hazing ritual and finally accept the not-so-new kid on the block.

Vinology Wine Bar, Restaurant and Retail Shop

110 South Main Street, Ann Arbor

Daily happy hour: 4
- 6 PM and Wednesdays from 9 p.m. to close.

Sunday: 4 - 10 PM, 50 wines by the bottle at 50% off.

Debra Jett runs the website Wine Women Online, and enjoys every wine for what it is

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The Slow Food movement began in Italy with the foundation of its forerunner organization, Arcigola, in 1986 to resist the opening of a McDonald's near Rome's Spanish Steps. The organization has expanded to include over 100,000 members with chapters in over 132 countries. Its structure is decentralized: each convivium's leader is responsible for promoting local artisans, local farmers, and local flavors through regional events such as Taste Workshops, wine tastings, and farmers' markets.