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The Grape American Road Trip

A portfolio to the power of 50

Washington Post article snippet: 'There's a new generation of sommeliers and consumers willing to think outside the box...'

U.S. wines from off the beaten track

By Dave McIntyre
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Wine is now made in all 50 states, but you wouldn't know it by looking at retail store shelves or restaurant wine lists.

Stover, 32, is the hyper-enthusiastic sommelier at Oya and Sei restaurants in Penn Quarter. He also consults for restaurant startups, blogs at Chiefwino.com and, since last summer, is brand manager of Vino50, a portfolio of artisan wines from unexpected areas in the United States.

around the country, and we decided it was a perfect fit," Gaiarin said. "We emphasize small, quality-minded producers from Europe and elsewhere, and here were several from the United States that were being ignored by other distributors."

Gaiarin acknowledged some concern that retailers and restaurants would be reluctant to stock wines from Colorado or Utah rather than California, Oregon or Washington state. But he said the market has been receptive.

"We carry wines from Switzerland, after all, so our customers expect us to bring them something unique," he said.

Through his experience at Oya and Sei, Stover said, he knew that many of today's wine consumers are open to trying something new.

"There's a new generation of sommeliers and consumers willing to think outside the box," he said. "They don't care about point scores from wine magazines. They don't need someone to tell them what to drink, and they don't believe wine has to be from California to be good. It can be a hard sell, but if you put it by the glass, it can move."

It probably doesn't hurt that one of the main producers in his portfolio has some serious celebrity cred with that young demographic. Arizona Stronghold Vineyards, with plantings near Sedona and in Cochise County, southeast of Tucson, is co-owned by Maynard James Keenan, lead singer for the progressive band Tool. The winery's Web site promises "minimally mucked-with wines that retain their natural vitality and character."

The other standouts in the Vino50 line are Idaho's Sawtooth Winery, with crowd-pleasing chardonnay and Riesling and some stylish reds, and Michigan's L. Mawby, which produces some fine sparkling wines. Stover's not stopping there. He has created a label called Shindig, with a juicy red blend produced by Mawby and a white to come later from New York's Finger Lakes. And he's looking for new frontiers.

"I'm obsessed with the idea of alternative packaging," he said. "I want to sell wines in kegs."

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best of them coming from Arizona, Michigan and Idaho. But Stover obviously has wider ambitions.

"I've always been a proponent of regional or local wines," said Stover, who has populated his restaurant lists with obscure bottlings, taking advantage of a D.C. law that allows restaurants and stores to "direct import" wines without going through a wholesaler.

That brought him to the attention of Siema Wines, a Springfield-based importer and distributor specializing in bottlings from small family wineries, primarily in Italy. Emanuele Gaiarin, Siema's principal partner, decided to beef up the company's selection of U.S. wines, and he recruited Stover to develop and sell the list.

"Andrew told us of the wineries he had discovered during his travels

Represented by Siema Wines in DC, MD and VA

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