

LOOKING FOR DELICIOUS WINE DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR? JOIN THE CLUB!

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Looking for the perfect gift for that certain someone who has everything? How about a couple bottles of Virginia wine delivered to your friend's door several times a year?

Instead of another sweater, kitchen appliance or perfume - think about tucking a brochure for a wine club under the tree.

Wine clubs, in case you haven't heard of them, are a terrific way to learn about and drink wines you won't find in big box stores, supermarkets or even specialty wine stores. Many wineries, particularly the smaller ones, only sell their wines through the winery or wine club. After all, if you only make 300 cases (3,600 bottles) of a particular wine, it's not worth the time or money to go through a distributor and send it halfway across the country. So you start a wine club.

Most wine clubs cost nothing to join and provide discounts on every bottle and case of wine you purchase. Typically, you agree to accept shipment of a certain number of bottles every month, quarter, or biannually, depending on the wine club.

Some let you choose the type of wine or the color (white or red); others have a take-it-or-leave-it mentality. Some offer other perks, such as invitations to special barrel tastings or winery events.

One winery we visited recently while in Sonoma - Ledson Winery (www.ledsonwinery.com) - owns a boutique hotel on the town's main square.

As members of the wine club, we're now entitled to a 10 percent discount on rooms at the hotel, not to mention private tastings in the "club" tasting room, an elegant, wood-lined room with a spectacular view of the vineyards that imparts a far different experience from the overcrowded tasting room on the winery's ground floor.

Some wine clubs are so exclusive, it can take years to get on the list.

My husband Keith has spent four years on the waiting list of the Sine Qua Non winery, whose wines typically get 98+ ratings from wine guru Robert Parker. Every six months they send him a postcard saying, in essence, "Ha ha, sucker! You're still not going to get any of our wines!" It's heartbreaking to be around him on those days.

But wine clubs aren't limited to wineries. Many states offer wine clubs to let you sample their wines.

Virginia, for instance, has a free wine club (you pay only for the wines and shipping) through its Web site - www.vawineclub.com. You can choose one bottle a month for \$14.95 or two bottles a month for \$24.95. There's even an online form to complete for a gift subscription.

You can also find wine-of-the-month (or semi-month) clubs, which work just like book-of-the-month clubs.

We used to belong to Southern Hemisphere Wine's club (www.southernwines.com) and enjoyed getting shipments of hard-to-find wines from Chile, Australia, Argentina, South Africa and New Zealand.

In fact, we find wine clubs so much fun that we tend to join them at nearly every winery we visit. This year, for instance, we've made trips to Napa and Sonoma. Total count on wine clubs: 20!

Let's just say UPS and FedEx are frequent visitors to our house. "Man, you people must love parties," the UPS guy mused after lugging a couple of cases onto our porch.

What could we say? For us, visiting a winery is what a visit to a nursery must be like for a gardener on the first warm day in April - intoxicating.

And when you think about being able to replicate the experience at home simply by opening a bottle of the winery's best, well, ... suddenly that college fund for the 15-year-old doesn't seem so important.

The only advice I'd provide about joining wine clubs and purchasing wine at wineries is the same I'd tell you when it comes to drinking wine - all things in moderation.

That advice is often hard to remember when you're standing in a winery's tasting room, sipping a luscious cabernet as the winemaker tells you what the weather was like the year the grapes in that wine were grown, and how they only sell the wine through the winery, and how wine club members get a 15-percent discount on cases.

And so, as I sit at my computer tapping out this column, Keith is across the room at his, deciding which wine clubs we need to cancel and which to keep.

After all, we have to make room for our trip to Italy this spring!

News to use

Wine Clubs that Debra recommends:

* Ledson Winery (www.ledsonwinery.com)

* Southern Hemisphere Wine (www.southernwines.com)

* Virginia Wine Club (www.vawineclub.com)

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