

NATIONAL

Remodeling house wines

Hotels' custom crushes add very special sips to menus

By SARAH STAPLES
Special Contributor

Ordering a glass of white or red while on vacation used to be a dicey exercise. Resorts' house wines have all too often ranked as inharmonious swill and were often uncorked by servers who couldn't tell a Cab from a Nebbiolo.

But hoteliers are finally giving their long-suffering oenophile guests reason to raise a glass. They're taking lowbrow brands off house wine lists. And the most inspired stays are creating bespoke house wines that can represent a radical upgrade to the past.

Private-label wines have gained in popularity against bigger, branded vintages for years, according to observers such as AC Nielsen. Top restaurants and a few hotels spied their potential early. Famous California wine-country eatery the French Laundry, for example,

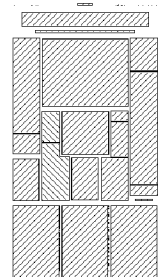
introduced its Modicum Napa Valley Cabernet to the menu a decade ago, around the time the Four Seasons' Biltmore Santa Barbara launched its first commemorative private label bottle.

Now, these custom crushes are exploding onto the hotel scene as a way for upscale properties to distinguish themselves, experts say. And the recognition individual wines are achieving has helped raise the bar for the industry.

"Every large hotel likes to have something they can call their own — representative of what they stand for," says Virginia Philip, who supervises a 28,000-bottle, AAA five-diamond cellar at the Breakers Palm Beach in Florida. The Breakers' first custom cabernet sauvignon, merlot, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc debuted in 2004, and the latest edition this August, along with a handful of hotels and resorts that have launched house wines for the first time this year.

"It's just the beginning, and I think it's elevating the standards for what a house wine should be," Philip says.

But satisfying the discerning palate doesn't come easy or cheap. Philip, one of only 16 female master sommeliers worldwide, and her team fly annually to a family-run



winery in France to oversee the details of producing consistently superior vintages.

What's more, although resort-brand wines abound, not all are worthy custom crushes. Some are custom-labeled or custom-bottled retail wines repackaged under the resort name.

The following are among hotels offering custom crushes.

Keswick Hall

Fossett's restaurant at this antique-filled hotel in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains uncorked the first private-label Edith's Chardonnay last August and Edith's Petit Verdot in September. Hotel staff sorted through tons of grapes, pumped juice into French oak barrels and oversaw fermentation to produce 50 cases of each wine, aided by Virginia Wineworks, a vintner with a custom-crush facility. The chardonnay grapes are from Carter's Mountain Winery about eight miles away. The reds are from Pollak Vineyard in Crozet, another local producer. Keswick will break ground on its own one-acre vineyard this spring. And Edith? She was Edith Fossett, Thomas Jefferson's cook at nearby Monticello.

Taste: Edith's Reserve Chardonnay, 2008: straw-hued with a nose of apples and pears, hints of oak. Edith's Reserve Petit Verdot, 2008: inky purple; tastes of blackberry and cassis. Pair the chardonnay with Fossett's lobster ravioli, the petit verdot with beef *tournedos* with fondant potato.

Contact: 701 Club Drive, Keswick, Va.; 1-888-778-2565; www.keswick.com. Rooms from \$395.

The Grand Del Mar

In two years, director of wine Jesse Rodriguez

has created 13 custom blends, with wineries from California to Europe, for Addison, the signature restaurant of this luxe golf resort on the north San Diego coast. Rodriguez has a soft spot for the Viader Cabernet Sauvignon, Howell Mountain 2005. Twelve barrels of a "fleshy and fruity" take on a traditional cab franc-cab sauv blend were conceived by his friend, Napa vintner Alan Viader, along with Rodriguez and two former colleagues from French Laundry.

Taste: Most popular is the Schloss Gobelsburg, Grüner Veltliner, Allerheiligenstiftung, Kamptal, Austria 2007: nose of lemon, grapefruit, green apple skin and bosque pear, with apricot, green sweet pea and white pepper on the palate. Pair with Addison's baby sea scallops with leek fondue.

Contact: 5300 Grand Del Mar Court, San Diego, Calif.; 858-314-2000; www.thegranddelmar.com. Rooms from \$395.

The Biltmore Santa Barbara

Since the decision a decade ago to mark the Biltmore's 1927 founding with an appropriately named bottle, 112 cases a year of Nineteen Twenty-Seven have been produced by Sunstone Winery, a local organic vineyard, for this Montecito, Calif., beach resort's restaurants. The syrah-based blend comes from California's Santa Barbara wine region. It's continually refined by a Biltmore team. Grapes mature at various times around Santa Barbara, so the best-tasting at any given time are chosen, regardless of vintage.

Taste: Nineteen Twenty-Seven: "smoky and earthy," mid-palate, deep

red berries and licorice balanced with florals. Pair with Bella Vista restaurant's Karabuta pork chop or Kobe tenderloin.

Contact: 1260 Channel Drive, Santa Barbara, Calif.; 805-969-2261; www.fourseasons.com/santabarbara. Rooms from \$375.

The Breakers Palm Beach

Four Breakers Label blends have been created annually since in 2004 in partnership with Domaine du Tariquet, a family-run vintner in tiny Eauze, in southern France. The wines, and house red and white sangrias, are available in four of nine Breakers restaurants. In all, 40,000 custom-crush bottles are quaffed each year at the mid-Florida barrier island resort. The Breakers owns a noted sushi place, Echo, nearby.

Taste: Domaine du Tariquet Cabernet Sauvignon, Gascony, France, 2005: full-bodied; overtones of blackberry, cassis and blueberry; tobacco and cherry on the finish. Pair with Echo's seared ginger beef.

Contact: 1 S. County Road, Palm Beach, Fla.; 561-655-6611; www.thebreakers.com. Rooms from \$499.

Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa

At an August 2008 charity auction, general manager Kelley Cosgrove won a row of chardonnay grapes for a year from Reynaldo Robledo, a former field worker who with his family now owns 200 wine-producing acres locally. Throughout the year, hotel executives worked in crews to help prune, pick and handcraft the resulting 25 cases of private-label chardonnay.

Taste: Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn Private Label Robledo Family Rancho Maria Chardonnay, 2008: nose of jasmine, approach of spice hinting of vanilla and lush fruitiness. Pair with chef Bruno Tison's

signature shrimp timbale with asparagus tips.

Contact: 100 Boyes Blvd, Sonoma; 707-938-9000; www.fairmont.com/Sonoma. Rooms from \$179.

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The Cloister at Sea Island

Sea Island chardonnay, pinot noir, merlot, brut and cabernet launched in 2006 on this very exclusive barrier island in Georgia. Heath Porter, wine and spirits director, approached winemaker Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat with the idea of tweaking Santa Barbara grapes to suit the haute-Southern menu of the Cloister's five-star restaurant, the Georgian Room. The resulting Sea Island chardonnay is also available in the gift shop. Au Bon Climat also handcrafted the pinot noir. The other three wines are from California growers.

Taste: Sea Island Chardonnay, Santa Maria Valley, California, 2007: elegant with all types of oyster shells, lemon and tangerine zest on the nose; finishing with vivacious acidity. Pair with Georgian Room's scallops, lemon and celery root puree.

Contact: 100 Cloister Drive, Sea Island, Ga.; 1-800-732-4752; www.seaisland.com. Rooms from \$750.

Hotel Vitale

Americano, the Italian-Californian restaurant in this hip hotel on San Francisco's revitalized Embarcadero waterfront, launched its first California syrah in 2005 from the previous year's vintage and has followed with two more.

All are produced exclusively for the hotel from plots in Carneros or Santa Barbara. Newbie winemaker and executive chef Paul Arenstam chose syrah grapes for their compatibility with his rustic food.

Taste: Dreamer, Las Madras Syrah, Carneros, 2004. Pair with Americano's braised oxtails (Roman-style) and new potatoes, pine nuts and herbs.

Contact: 8 Mission St., San Francisco; 415-278-3700; www.hotelvitale.com. Rooms from \$299.

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