

THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Taking pomposity out of wine

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I like wine well enough. It's usually tasty, can be as inexpensive as you like, is often served with bread and cheese (both of which I am also quite fond), and has a certain romance that, say, a keg does not. But that's about all I know about it.

I suppose one place to learn more would be a wine tasting, but the fear of being the only clown in the room who can't tell a chardonnay from a pinot grigio by smell and doesn't know what earthly use a beverage could have for "legs" always prevented me from feeling like I'd get my money's worth. So when a press release for a "Rock and Roll Wine Tasting" crossed my desk, I was quite sure that you and I both needed to know what that was all about. Yes, folks, it's as fun as it sounds.

David Hammond, co-owner of Rock and Roll Wine, says the whole point is to take the pretentiousness out of trying out a few new vinos, and to that end he greeted everyone at the door with a cheery, "Welcome! Have some Sex!" and poured us all glasses of sparkling M. Lawrence Sex, "vinified" right here in Michigan. Then he handed out the descriptions of the eight featured wines, explaining that they were arranged in a horseshoe pattern around the room but that we weren't required to stick to any order, and took great care to tell everyone to dump out anything we didn't like and fill up on whatever we did. Definitely un-stuffy.

Sure, the descriptions were full of phrases like "zingy mouth feel" and "crisp mineral finish," but the flavors were all distinctive enough that I fancied myself actually tasting the "hedonistic hints of dark chocolate that slither off your tongue." And each wine was paired, not with cheese or fish or dainty hors d'oeuvres, but with a rock 'n' roll song - everything from "Kiss" by Prince to "So Alive" by Ryan Adams to "Just Like Heaven" by The Cure. (I'd have thought that the last song would be a good match for the Sex, but as it turns out that one was paired with "Beast of Burden" by the Rolling Stones. Hmmm.) The songs themselves played for the first bit, and then the Bob Skon Trio came in for some live music.

This stroke of brilliance was engineered by Chris Hammond, David's brother and partner in the venture. The two had dabbled in wine-making with some friends and eventually started their own winery in Oregon, called Amplified Wines. Chris liked the wine gig so much that he decided to become a sommelier, and during the course of his training it occurred to him that it would be way more fun to match wines with good tunes than with seasonal delicacies. After all, where do you spend more time drinking: at the dinner table, or at a concert?

It was no great surprise to discover that these parties were born in Las Vegas, where Chris lives. They throw one a month or so out there, with a big show about twice a year (the last one was at Mandalay Bay, and drew upwards of 3,000 people to see Sugar Ray, Everclear and Dashboard Confessional). The idea is to have a different venue with different wines and a different performing act every time, and Ann Arbor and Royal Oak are their new target markets. It sure looks like we're ready for it - Arbor Brewing Company's tap room and the beer cellar were packed elbow-to-elbow. Renee Carriere and Lauren McKnight-Ford heard about it through LocalWineEvents.com, and liked it so much they and their colleagues at Fidelity Investments decided to have a team-building exercise there. And got a 98 percent turnout. Bill and Reagan Kowske drove in from St. Joseph, where they're opening a new wine and martini bar called Port 412, to see what it was all about. Shannon O'Brien and Will Kuchera came even though they're not really wine aficionados, since it just sounded like fun. Asked if she'd learned anything from the event, O'Brien smiled and took a sip of her Shiraz. "I think I'm going to continue my education."

DETAILS

Rock and Roll Wine

www.rocknrollwine.com

What: A wine tasting that's as un-stuffy as it gets, with a soundtrack, live music and a total focus on not taking one's wine or one's self too seriously.