

World enough and wine

Dinners with vintners, tasting trips to bucolic corners of Europe -- what's not to like about an importer's life?

By Corie Brown, Times Staff Writer
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IT starts as an idle thought while navigating the twisting roads of Provence, or at the first glimpse of the terraced hillsides of Spain's Priorat. For some, simply staring at the constantly expanding selection of Italian wines in a favorite wine store brings it on. There is a pause and a smile as the wine lover dreams about a life spent tootling along the wine world's less traveled roads, sitting down to fabulous meals with world-class winemakers, taking home exceptional discoveries — the wine importer's life, yes, that would be a sweet life.

It is a fantasy that proved irresistible to four Californians — Emily Weissman and Stephan Schindler of Winemonger, an importer of Austrian wines; Betty Dunbar, whose Vinalia Imports focuses on bringing under-appreciated French wines to California; and Brian Larky, whose company, Dalla Terra Winery Direct, acts as sole U.S. agent for selected Italian wineries.

...Not only do they bring in bottles that wouldn't be available here otherwise, but they also help keep prices in check ...

Like most independent wine entrepreneurs who play the import game, Brian Larky lives on the edge. But he's playing at a higher elevation than many. Last week when he was hand-selling his Italian wines, it was to billionaire moguls dining at Montana's Yellowstone Club. Larky, 44, poured wines and worked the crowd.

"Some of these guys are really into wine, extremely knowledgeable and very interested," Larky says. "As long as you know your stuff and are comfortable, the evening just flows." The good news is that the average mogul doesn't ski when he goes to his mountain retreat, Larky says, so he had the untracked powder to himself that day.

It's not the life he envisioned when he started Dalla Terra Winery Direct in 1990, he says. It's better.

A winemaker by training, the Culver City native tucked his UC Davis oenology degree into a suitcase and moved to Italy in 1985. "I wanted a different perspective, a view of *free time*," he says. So he rolled up his sleeves and started cleaning tanks at Lombardia's celebrated sparkling winemaker Ca' del Bosco, eventually working his way up the winemaking ranks.

When he was ready to return to the U.S. five years later, Larky was approached by a handful of Italian vintners who thought their wines weren't selling as well as they could in the States. Could he help them? The seed of the idea for Dalla Terra Winery Direct was planted. "It's a twist on importing," he says. "We act as the sole U.S. agents for our winery clients, connecting them directly with distributors in each state."



Brian Larky, a U.S. agent for Italian wines, travels to Italy five times a year. His visits enable him to crew on a Monaco-based yacht-racing team in his

The distributors, in most instances, act as the official importers for Larky's portfolio of wines in their individual states, and the wines are shipped directly to them. He rarely takes possession of the wines. So, instead of tacking on the traditional 40% importer's fee, Dalla Terra charges a 15% agent's fee.

"We're too small to pick up unknown wines," Larky says. But there have been wines whose rising popularity with Americans is a gratifying surprise. Dalla Terra's producer in Brunello di Montalcino, Casanova di Neri, was named the world's best winery of 2005 by Wine Spectator magazine.

Also among the just 13 wineries in Dalla Terra's portfolio are Alois Lageder in Alto Adige, Boroli in Piedmont and Avignonesi in Montepulciano. Staying small, Larky says, enables him to place the entire portfolio with a single distributor in each state.

The essence of the job is to keep the wines moving smoothly between the wineries and distributors throughout the United States, Larky says. It takes an office staff of four in his Napa headquarters as well as an eight-person team of regional managers working with U.S. distributors. By cutting the importer's fee, "generally speaking we can lower the prices of their [Italian] wines 20% to 30% overnight," he says.

When Larky's not skiing in Montana, he's in Italy, at least five times a year. That's often enough for him to be part of the crew of a professional yacht-racing team on a 100-foot carbon fiber sloop based in Monaco. It's not a glory position — he's the grunt at the back of the boat trimming the sails — but he gets to be on the boat. Being part of the action — whether it's wine, skiing or sailing — is better for him than the sidelines.



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