Nonino

VIRTUAL TASTES

Wine and spirits brands offer tastings from the comfort of home

BY TRACY KALER

On a recent Saturday afternoon, Gwendolyn Osborn, director of education and content for online retailer Wine.com, swirled a velvety glass of Château L'Évangile Blason de L'Évangile (Pomerol) while hosting a live wine-tasting session in cooperation with Saskia de Rothschild, chairwoman of Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Lafite), one of Bordeaux's most storied winemaking families.

"When I taste a good Pomerol wine, I think of velvet—velvet that coats your mouth," Ms. de Rothschild says to her co-host and audience. While sniffing and sipping four wines from Chile, Argentina, Languedoc, and Bordeaux, she elaborated on history, the nuances of each region, and the company's approach to winemaking, before answering questions. Prior to the free 40-minute tasting, viewers were encouraged to order the portfolio of wines on Wine.com (for $129.99), but could also buy the bottles later and catch the event on the company's YouTube channel.

Nowadays, wine enthusiasts don't need a tasting room to sample a luscious glass of Bordeaux, and avid spirits drinkers don't need a tavern to enjoy a fine Scotch. If there's one pastime taking on new meaning during these trying times, it's drinking.

Sommeliers, importers, and other experts in the luxury wine and spirits industry are partnering with vintners, distillers, and representatives from family-owned labels to host virtual tastings and entertaining get-togethers via Zoom and Instagram.

Tasting virtually has its benefits, according to Suzanne Henricksen, co-founder of The Crafty Cask, a Northern California–based company dedicated to promoting craft alcoholic beverages. She explains that participants can meet like-minded folks from other places.

Furthermore, guests get prime access, as they are able to speak with the distillers and winemakers directly, a rarity in person. During virtual tastings, "we bring the experience to them through visuals of the people, process, vineyards, orchards, tasting room—so it's immersive," Ms. Henricksen says.

Terlato Wines, an Illinois-based importer, producer, and marketer of wines in the U.S., partnered with Rare, an exclusive and limited-production Champagne from family-owned Piper Heidsieck. An online "Master Class" led by Serguei Aver, general manager of Petrossian, the 100-year-old caviar and smoked-fish company, and Rare's business-development manager Jonathan Boulangeat, allows attendees to savor a unique food and wine pairing from their armchairs. Participants receive a bottle of 2006 Rare Champagne, as well as a package of Tsar Cut smoked salmon, blinis, and crème fraîche from Petrossian. Guests purchase a tasting for two ($250) or four ($500).

"In response to the current situation, we pivoted to providing connoisseur consumers with a unique experience that they could enjoy in their homes," says Mary Anne Sullivan, vice president of communications at Terlato.

Marlène Awaad

Saskia de Rothschild of Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Lafite), shown above, holds virtual tastings with Wine.com. Nonino, a producer of amaro from Italy, whose bottles are shown at left, has embraced the world of internet tastings, too.

Clos du Val's "Tasting at Your Table," shown above, transports oenophiles to California wine country, from the comfort of their home.

Clos du Val—the Napa Valley winery founded by John and Henrietta Goelet, descendants of Bordeaux's Barton & Guestier—takes a different approach with its online tastings.

The brand has created "Tasting at Your Table" to transport oenophiles to California wine country. For these one-on-one experiences, wine lovers choose from several packages, and Clos du Val reaches out to schedule a personal virtual tasting.

Selections include the 2018 Estate Chardonnay and 2017 Gran Val Pinot Noir—both from Carneros—and Hirondelle Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon, Stags Leap District.

"The launch of our personal, one-on-one tastings since travel restrictions started falling in place are an entirely new initiative for us," says Shannon Muracchioli, director of marketing for Clos Du Val. She adds that the "Ultimate Virtual Tasting Pack"—a selection of limited-production wines—is most popular. Packages range from $95 to $395.

In the world of grappa and amaro, Nonino, the lauded producer in Friuli, Italy, is also collaborating with Terlato Wines. Sixth-generation family member Francesca Nonino oversees a complimentary virtual tasting of Amaro Quintessentia cocktails, and pours the deliciously subtle L'Aperitivo Nonino Botanical Drink—an herbal spritz cocktail—using Instagram Live. If they like, guests can purchase spirits on ReserveBar.com to craft drinks alongside Nonino. During the tasting, they can also elaborate on their favorite spritz recipes, sharing their libations with the other tasters.

Liquor stores are jumping into the virtual game as well. Milroy's of Soho, London's oldest whisky shop, invites dram-drinkers to partake in Zoom meetups. The lineup has included brothers Sukhinder and Rajbir Singh's Elixir Distillers, highlighting single-malt whiskies from the Elements of Islay; and Douglas Laing & Co., a third-generation artisan Scotch purveyor pouring five options, including the Rock Island 21-year-old limited release. Tasting tickets run in the £40-range and come with samples of each whisky.

Meanwhile, Ms. Henricksen, along with partner and sommelier Evan Rothrock, hold free virtual tastings each week. They select craft-alcohol brands, tailoring each session to a style or theme. A recent event featured Charbay, a 13th-generation distilling family with deep roots in former Yugoslavia crafting R5 Whiskey from Bear Republic Brewing's Racer 5 Beer; and Erstwhile Mezcal, a Brooklyn-based importer dedicated to small family producers of artisanal and ancestral mezcal.

The Crafty Cask encourages tasters to purchase featured spirits to sip in real time, so guests receive links to ordering options in advance. "Our craft-alcohol tastings are set up as meetings, which means we all see each other's faces," Ms. Henricksen says. "Everyone can unmute themselves to talk, and they can chat via text as well. Makes for a much more engaging experience." ■

Katie and Ryan Carrothers