

THE SOUTH WHIDBEY RECORD

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Vino Amore has got the goods on wine

By PATRICIA DUFF

FREELAND: Unique and interesting wine doesn't always have to be pricey.

That's the attitude taken by Gail Liston and Brian Plebanek, the owners of Freeland wine shop [Vino Amore](#).

A visit one morning to the shop revealed the small-town flavor of the place, tucked into the small alcove of stores off Main Street across from the Freeland Post Office. Cozy and neat with more than 1,200 varieties of wines lining the walls, [Vino Amore](#) feels like a romantic respite from the brightness and bustle of busy downtown Freeland.

The sun is kept out with dark window shades to protect the climate sensitive wine from getting too warm, so the atmosphere is dark, cool and perfect for browsing labels.

Liston is on hand with helpful advice Tuesday through Friday, with Plebanek joining her on the weekends.

'We're a small shop and are able to get to know our customers,' said Liston. 'We like to get to know what they like and then find things that might suit their tastes?'

The couple tries to introduce people to wines outside of what they know.

'There are plenty of wines that are fun and interesting to drink that have the same price tag as what you may buy at the grocery store,' Liston said. 'We want people to know that we can help them find something they may not know about and end up loving, instead of buying the same old stuff they buy all the time at the supermarket.'

Liston and Plebanek recently celebrated five years in the business and said that they have doubled their inventory since first opening in 2002.

They carry a heavy variety of Northwest wines and fine wines from California, Australia and the major areas in Europe, but are also bringing in wines that are becoming popular from some unexpected parts of the world. Wines from places like Spain, South Africa, Romania, Italy, Argentina and Chile have some surprisingly inexpensive bottles that are rapidly gaining attention from wine enthusiasts throughout the world.

Liston said that some of the wine reps they deal with are great at letting them know what's new and exciting and keep them tuned in to what is up-and-coming in the market.

'The Malbecs from Argentina are gaining popularity lately. So, we'll order some and try them,' said Liston.

The couple also chooses wine by what they like themselves and what they think customers will like.

They have all-year-round wine tastings from noon to 6 p.m. every Saturday. This allows them to introduce new wines to customers and gauge what they like and don't like.

'If you taste enough wine, you'll find something you like,' Liston said. 'There's a wine for everybody.'

Pasek Cellars of Mount Vernon makes a passion-fruit wine that Liston said, after it's chilled, tastes exactly like a mai tai. So, if you think you don't like wine, she said, there is still something to taste that might surprise you.

'Take some of that home, drink it by the pool and you'll feel like you're in Hawaii!' she said.

Both Liston and Plebanek have a thorough knowledge of their wares. It is one of the true advantages to buying wine in a shop when there is someone who can describe the wine to you before you try it.

Liston said she sort of stumbled upon her interest in wine while passing through Sonoma, California wine country for a theater excursion. She went to a few of the vineyards and came home with several wines that she shared with friends.

'That trip exposed me to good wine,' she said. 'Once you scratch the surface you realize how vast the subject is.'

Later she met and married Plebanek. And after a year and half of studying and researching regions, grapes, varieties, methods and everything having to do with wine, the couple opened [Vino Amore](#).

Liston said one of the most interesting aspects for her in the study of wine was the discovery of how the variety of the grape, the soil, the climate and changeable weather patterns can change what a vintner will end up with in the bottle.

The big houses of California like Kendall Jackson, for example, have their wine-making process down to a science. They have a certain style that they produce in every bottle and they do it well. But it's the small European vintners that excite Liston. They let the weather and the year determine what a batch of wine will taste like and they will masterfully, yet serendipitously, produce these little gems of wine that could be produced only by them, in that particular soil, in that particular year, Liston explained.

[Vino Amore](#) is located at 1614 E. Main St., Freeland.

Wine prices at [Vino Amore](#) range from \$5 to \$200, with case discounts available. Special orders can be taken for hard-to-find wines and [Vino Amore](#) will offer assistance with food and wine pairing. They also carry Riedel and Spiegelau stemware, decanters, openers and other accessories, as well as olive oils, vinegars and local gourmet food products.

Shop hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., Saturday and 12 to 5 p.m. Sunday. Wine tastings are at 12 to 6 p.m. every Saturday. The shop is closed Mondays.

Call 331-7661 or visit www.vinoamore.com for more info.