

Selecting the perfect pour from Mohegan Sun's comprehensive wine collection is far from a gamble

VAST STASH

by lisa shames

If you want primo wine, you don't need to trek to Napa. Just head to Mohegan Sun. It's a little-known secret that the property is a hot spot for great pours from wine connoisseurs. "The Mohegan Sun wine program has developed over the years to be one of the top in Connecticut," beverage support services manager Joseph Vita says. "Many people don't think that regarding a 'casino,' but the fact is that our program has a lot of depth and includes diverse wines of not only the name producers, but of the little boutique and interesting small-production wines, too."



More than 500 bottles are stored at a crisp 52 degrees in the wine room at Todd English's Tuscany.

To create the wine lists at Mohegan Sun, the key has been to get away from the outdated one-bottle-fits-all mentality and instead focus on matching the vino to the food at each restaurant. Todd English's Tuscany emphasizes Italian wines, pinot noirs and California classics (500 bottles are housed in a temperature-controlled wine room adjacent to the dining room) to complement its traditional regional Italian cuisine. Not to mention the restaurant won *Wine Spectator's* prestigious Award of Excellence for the last three years. At Birches Bar & Grill, comfort wines from

Washington and California pair nicely with its contemporary Native American-inspired dishes, and a variety of pours are also available at the Longhouse, Pompeii & Caesar and Bamboo Forest. "A cookie-cutter list doesn't work," Vita says. "And we have moved 180 degrees away from that to offer great wines to match the food profiles of what the chefs are offering and the dynamic of the room."

Just as important as what's on the plate is the person behind it. To accommodate the taste buds of both in-the-know oenophiles and beginner grape nuts, Vita balances the list with beloved wines as well as ones to challenge their palates. Mohegan Sun's relationships with suppliers, wineries and winemakers allow access to rare or limited releases of families of wines it already works with, such as the first release of "M" by Michael Mondavi, Soldara Brunello di Montalcino (of which the entire state receives only a few cases) and Vita's personal favorite, Masseto by Ornellaia.

"...our program has a lot of depth..."

—Joseph Vita, beverage support services manager at Mohegan Sun

But perhaps the most integral part of developing Mohegan Sun's wine program involves the 150-plus staff of servers and bartenders working in the various restaurants, lounges, the gaming bars, room service and catering. These employees don't just simply recite the wine list for diners, as is the case in many restaurants. They all participate in ongoing wine-training sessions that run the gamut from tastings and food pairings to discussions with international and domestic winemakers and suppliers. And because so many of those employees have been at Mohegan Sun for a long time, they have a greater sense of what guests prefer. The low turnover helps Vita build each training and educational session upon the previous ones. "That challenges me to find good and interesting wines, and [servers and bartenders] challenge me as well," he says. "That's a luxury that I definitely don't take for granted." We'll drink to that. ♠

Sun WineFest 2009

With more than 1,000 international fine wines and specialty beers available to sample and some of the greatest chefs on hand, Sun WineFest has become New England's most spectacular wine and food show. During the two-day series of events held at Mohegan Sun's Uncas Ballroom and Convention Center, attendees can soak up tips from some of the greatest winemakers and craft beer makers as well as top chefs such as Todd English, Jasper White, Susur Lee, Douglas Rodriguez, Norman Van Aken and Jacques Torres. Exhibitors will also showcase the latest in wine storage, accessories and specialty foods. On Saturday evening, Mohegan Sun's executive chef Michael Luboff will host an impressive lineup of culinary stars for the **Celebrity Chef Dine Around**, a fundraiser to benefit the American Liver Foundation. World-famous chefs, television personalities and cookbook authors will each prepare a specialty dish, while representatives of the festival's most exciting wines will pour a perfectly matched selection.



Sun WineFest '09, Convention Center, January 17-18, noon to 5 pm; \$70 one-day pass, \$110 weekend pass; tickets available at the Mohegan Sun Box Office and Ticketmaster (886.886.0070, ticketmaster.com). Celebrity Chef Dine Around, Uncas Ballroom, January 17, 8 pm to midnight; \$175; tickets are available at sunwinefest.com or by calling Life Marketing and Events (860.953.0444). For more information, visit mohegansun.com

