

# D.I.Y. by the Barrel (Please Keep Your Shoes On)

THE two women walking down Varick Street one recent evening glanced casually at the storefront, perhaps expecting a display of handbags or furniture. Instead, they saw oak barrels — the kind you might see in Napa Valley — stacked high on the other side of the glass. After stopping to stare, they entered to examine firsthand this unlikely sight so near the Holland Tunnel in downtown Manhattan.

If nothing else, City Winery has novelty going for it. Since the first crush of grapes in October, within hailing distance of scores of yellow cabs, this bizarre juxtaposition of Manhattan streets and winemaking paraphernalia has riveted pedestrians.

“People are always looking in,” Michael Dorf, the proprietor, said during a tour of the winery last week. “First they think it’s a brewery — they’re used to those — but then they see all the barrels, and they can’t believe it.”

But there it is, 21,000 square feet of downtown real estate, with exposed brick, 140-year-old beams of Southern yellow pine and an all-important loading dock, and it’s not just a winery. Mr. Dorf, a music promoter who founded the Knitting Factory, the seminal downtown music spot of the 1980s and ’90s, has hedged his bets. City Winery, at 155 Varick Street, is also a music venue with 325 seats, a restaurant with gleaming displays of [cheese](#) and salumi, and an event space for classes and tastings.

Performances by [Philip Glass](#) and [Marianne Faithfull](#) are coming up. Klezmer brunches are scheduled on Sundays, cheese classes are offered every other week, and noted winemakers like Didier Segulier of William Fevre in Chablis and Ales Kristancic of Movia in Slovenia are to give talks and tastings.

“Really, it was built selfishly,” Mr. Dorf said. “To be able to sit at a table and watch a concert and be able to drink good wine and nibble on good cheese and charcuterie, it’s a civilized experience. I’m sure I’m not the only 40-year-old balding guy who’s grown up and would rather sit than stand for a concert.”

Still, the centerpiece is winemaking, which is not as alien to lower Manhattan as it might seem. The Lower East Side was once a center of production for sweet kosher and sacramental wines. But City Winery caters to the reality-show age. It’s a kind of interactive building, offering would-be urban winemakers the chance to help make their own. They need only part with anywhere from around \$7,000 to almost \$12,000 a barrel — about 21 cases or 232 bottles — with the price varying by selection of grapes, barrels, winemaking regime, bottles and labels.

City Winery is one of several custom winemaking facilities that have opened around the country in the last decade. Crushpad in San Francisco and Portland Wine Project in Portland, Ore., both offer similar hands-on participation, while, compared with those economy-class operations, Napa Valley Reserve in Saint Helena, Calif., offers a piece of a corporate jet, allowing members to help tend the vines and make the wines, for fees beginning around \$150,000.

It’s not exactly a formula made for hard times. City Winery ultimately has the capacity to produce 10,000 cases of wine at a time, the equivalent of a good-size boutique winery. Of the 5,000 cases, or 230 barrels, made in the first harvest, a third have been sold, a third are reserved for the house, and a third are still awaiting ownership. The recession hasn’t helped.

“I had maybe 100 barrels sold before we opened, and maybe 15 of those came through,” Mr. Dorf said. “It’s not easy to part with \$8,000, no matter how sloshed you are.”

To oversee production, Mr. Dorf hired a professional, David Lecomte, who was born in the heart of the northern Rhone Valley and most recently worked for Herzog Wine Cellars, a kosher winemaker based in Oxnard, Calif. Mr. Lecomte is the one who has to negotiate the delicate challenges of shipping grapes from far-off vineyards while navigating the myriad demands and questions of his citizen winemakers.

Grape procurement over long distance is tricky. Grapes need to be coddled and kept cool so they don’t break or bruise, which might set off a premature fermentation. Despite the relative proximity of the Long Island and Finger Lakes wine districts, City Winery went long in its first harvest, buying grapes from Napa, Sonoma and Lake counties in California and the Willamette Valley in Oregon.

“The shipping was perfect, but it did cost a lot of money,” Mr. Lecomte said. “We need to work on the financial aspect.”

More problematic has been communicating with the proud owners of barrels, each of whom has a different set of desires and expectations for the wine. They often know what they like, Mr. Lecomte said, but are not sure how to express themselves.

“That’s a very challenging discussion to have with our members, to translate sensations into words,” Mr. Lecomte said.

Some of the barrels were sold to absentee owners, who wish only for a finished product to offer as Christmas gifts. Others are more hands-on, like Marc Rosenberg, who owns Lost Highway Films, a production company. Mr. Rosenberg is a wine lover who says he has always nursed a desire to make his own. Then he discovered City Winery right around the corner from his office.

So far, Mr. Rosenberg is highly involved, tasting his [cabernet sauvignon](#), made from grapes from Haystack Peak Vineyards in Napa Valley, every few weeks.

“I’m looking for something that is very well structured, with good tannins, a great nose and that woosh in the mouth,” he said. “David understood what I’ve been looking for, and he’s been working with me.”

Most of the wine will be ready in about a year. As for the remaining unsold barrels, Mr. Dorf is fatalistic. At worst, he’ll be sitting on a lot of wine.

“If, God forbid, I don’t sell the remaining barrels, I can sell it for \$8 a glass at the bar and make even more money,” he said. “But that’s not the model. If we don’t do it in year one, we’ll do it in year two.”