

Online wine guide caters to Ontario sippers

Free website combines expert reviews with LCBO supply details

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Serial Internet entrepreneur Bryan McCaw had just sold his latest company and was sitting down to celebrate when the idea for his next venture literally hit him in the mouth.

"I went into my local LCBO and said, 'I just sold my company and want a great bottle of shiraz to celebrate,'" he recalls. The staffer handed him a \$100 bottle, which McCaw accepted with great anticipation. "I brought it home and it was awful."

Flush with cash from the 2007 sale of his prior Net-based venture, the 46-year-old went on something of a pent-up wine-buying spree. He soon found that he was engaging in what a wine expert dubbed "wine roulette" — buying wine blindly in the hope of finding something great.

McCaw also learned that the tasting quotes helpfully placed on the LCBO wine racks often came from marketing material supplied by the vintners themselves.

"I was buying on those reviews



Bryan McCaw, left, and his team of critics offer advice to wine lovers.

and I learned afterwards that there were often many different points of view on a wine," he says. "I started to realize that I should look for a consensus around a wine. If two or three critics like it, then generally it is pretty good."

That realization led to the creation of McCaw's latest startup: WineAlign, a web-based service that alerts wine lovers of the latest new releases to the LCBO (more than 100 every two weeks, according to McCaw), along with reviews from a panel of experts on staple wines and

limited-quantity Vintages wines.

McCaw assembled his panel of critics from a stable of eight regular wine experts who have tasted and rated much of the LCBO's current inventory and participate in the board's regular tastings every two weeks. The result of their collective reviews can be found at winealign.com.

"What we do fundamentally is we answer the question, 'What wine do I buy?' We can tell you what is the top-rated Cabernet in stock at your local LCBO under \$25."

The website marries the reviews with inventory data from the LCBO to let users see not only what tastes good, but whether it's in stock at nearby stores.

Currently, WineAlign is offered to consumers under two service levels — known as a "freemium" model in web circles.

There is the free level, which lets you create an account, designate your favourite stores, save a list of your favourite wines and discuss wines with other users. It also lets you search for top-rated wines at your local store and pair the right wine with the food being served.

Besides advertising on the website, McCaw and his partners make their money from a small percentage of users (about 7 per cent) who pay \$3 per month for premium service, which gives them access to the critics' reviews, their top picks, and previews every two weeks about new-release vintage wines.

It also lets them use a "palate profiler" to give greater weight to their favourite critics on the panel and less weight to others.

David Lawrason, a WineAlign critic and minority partner in the venture, says the immediacy of the web-based venture means subscribers can read reviews and act upon them, something they can't

always do with print reviews.

"The Vintages wines, they come and they go," he says. "So by the time I historically was able to publish reviews on these wines, they would be gone. So it was really kind of pointless."

Typically, WineAlign posts reviews of new Vintages product five days before they hit the shelves, giving subscribers plenty of time to plot their purchases.

As the site's first Toronto-based critic, Lawrason helped McCaw with the early development of the service and business model. To him, its strength is the immediacy of the reviews and the fact there are several critics.

"This offers (users) the ability to compare everybody," he says. "We don't taste as a panel, all our reviews are independent. So if you go on there and see four different critics giving a wine a pretty good rating, then it is probably pretty good wine."

The site has 16,000 subscribers so far, and is growing by about 8 per cent per month, McCaw says.

Although there are similar web-based websites in the U.S. and elsewhere, the advantage for WineAlign is the province-wide dominance of the LCBO and the fact it does a good job of tracking its stock.