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The Curious Grape offers wine and an education

By Nancy Dunham
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A little something to drink, a little something to eat, an interesting speaker: all the ingredients for a date night. That's what Emma Zinsmeister, 25, and her fiancé, Steve Swartz, 26, discovered when they moved to Shirlington in 2006 and walked by the Curious Grape.

The cost of the shop's weekly wine "events"? Nothing, except for the bottles of wine the couple occasionally buy.

"I actually didn't like wine until I started going into the Curious Grape and learning more about it," Zinsmeister said. "We started going to the tastings and events. They were free and really easy to do and a lot of fun. It's just so accessible; the staff is so friendly, and that's important for people new to wine."

At first glance, you might not understand the reason for the excitement. Don't all wine stores haul out the vino and crackers?

Perhaps, but step inside the door of what regulars call "the Grape" and you'll immediately understand Zinsmeister's point. A visit there is akin to entering a celebratory food and wine experience.

The Grape "is like a giant, friendly magnet," said Gerry Greenwood, 60, of Arlington. "The wine, the food, combined with the knowledge that the staff has and willingly shares -- that is what sets them apart."

Think of the wine events as a series of lectures, complete with handouts, that highlight select wines from every major region, grape and style. Instructors -- who may be vintners from around the world or Grape staffers who have been accredited as certified specialists of wine -- have also offered events centered on eras, such as wines that were popular in the '60s and '70s.

Combine the expert instructors' knowledge, the wine samplings, the food pairings (such as chocolates, locally made candies, gourmet cheeses, pts and other specialty foods available at the Grape), and you have the makings of a charming date night.

The events are the brainchild of Curious Grape President Suzanne McGrath, who teamed with business partners to open the store in summer 2001.

A lawyer and former pastry chef, McGrath opened the store as a way to meld her intellectual and creative interests.

"I enjoyed my work as a pastry chef, but I didn't know wine at all," McGrath, 41, said recently. "I'd watch sommeliers and read books on wine . . . and just found it very interesting."

So interesting, in fact, that she signed up for advanced training and has been certified as a "wine educator" by the Society of Wine Educators. The education was so valuable that she then paid for 16 members of her staff to be certified as specialists.

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"I realized that for many wine was inaccessible," McGrath said. "That's why we have such a strong focus on making education fun and accessible."

Consider Saturday's sherry event.

"People get the idea that sherry is sweet," she said. "They don't realize it goes from bone dry to very sweet with a million styles in between. . . . There's also the name, which people associate with cooking sherry. People don't understand what sherry is all about." One of the pairings she'll present: manzanilla sherry with Marcona almonds, both from Spain.

Attendees at next week's Tuscany event will learn how climate variations affect the ripeness of the grapes and, thus, the taste of the wines. They'll sample the wines and taste some food. Attendance is capped at 40.

"It really is fun and different," said Joanna Wenk, 39, of Arlington, a longtime customer. "It's also a fantastic resource. I attended an event there and met a winemaker from New Zealand. We're traveling there soon, and we'll meet with him there and he'll take us around. You meet unique people at the Grape."

Dunham is a freelance writer.

Curious Grape 4056 Campbell Ave., Arlington. 703-671-8700. <http://www.curiousgrape.com> *Hours:* Monday-Thursday 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; Friday-Saturday 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; Sunday noon-6 p.m. *Events:* Free wine-tasting seminars, generally at least twice a week. Sign up by e-mail or phone. Upcoming sessions: *Wines of Spain's Sherry Region:* Saturday at 1 p.m.; *A Taste of Tuscany: From Chianti to Brunello:* Tuesday, at 6 and 7 p.m. and Jan. 23 at 1 p.m. The store also offers free daily tastings. *Gerry Greenwood*

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