



Chris Keel of Put a Cork In It arrives at the restaurant a bit early to wrap the bottles and mark them. A few choice bottles are uncorked for the "happy hour" before the tasting.

THE WINE CLUB



Tables are pushed together and the guys take their places. Let the tasting begin.

For the past year, these grape lovers have gathered to swirl, sip and swish their way through an evening of wine, pizza and guy talk. We sit in for a session.

By Meda Kessler Photos by Ralph Lauer



While it's not a professional tasting, the guys are still serious about the wines.

T

's Monday night at Ellerbe Fine Foods, and the lights are on and the parking lot full despite the closed sign on the front door.

Chris Keel, owner of Put a Cork In It, is ready and waiting with brown paper, tape and a black marker as each man hands him a bottle of wine. He wraps each bottle carefully, tightly, and marks it with a number. Many are uncorked to breathe.

Ellerbe co-owner Richard King is arranging clean wine glasses on a long table, and people are pushing four-tops together to create one large table in the middle of the back dining room at the Magnolia Avenue restaurant. Creedence Clearwater Revival, the old stuff, is piped through the restaurant's sound system.

Those with well-trained palates trickle in: Grace sommelier Ryan Tedder; Fort Worth Club general manager Michael Thackerson; Jay Herd, a Fort Worth ob-gyn who's a passionate collector; and, unbeknownst to some, winemaker Robert Foley, in town for a wine dinner the following day.

A few special bottles have been opened for the "cocktail hour," and someone else procures some cheese and crackers and olives. It's the night of the BCS championship, but the talk is mainly of TCU's Rose Bowl victory. Smart phones are set to monitor the game in progress.

As Tedder continues to bemoan the failure of his beloved Arkansas Razorbacks in the Cotton Bowl and someone else wants to know where to get the best fried chicken in town, Keel pops a pour spout onto bottle No. 1, pours an ounce into a glass and passes it to his right. There are 20 to go.

This informal gathering of wine lovers started a year ago. "Richard and I talked about getting together once a week, but everyone's stretched for time," says Keel, who owns the Park Hill retail wine



Winemaker Robert Foley, exhibiting really neat penmanship, takes a few notes.



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While everyone takes the tasting seriously, the laughs come easily. Below, Richard King studies his glass ... hard.

THE WINE CLUB

store with wife Deedra. "We decided to make it a monthly thing instead."

Themes are selected; in January, it was wines from anywhere outside the United States — broad enough for you? While the event is casual, Keel prints up pages so everyone can keep tasting notes.



"It's fun to taste some wines you might not normally get a chance to sample," says King, who selects the bottles for Ellerbe's wine list. "Plus, it's a kind of a boys night out for some."

Categories run from pinots to wines you can drink with barbecue. It's an exercise in the sniff, the taste, the swirl.

According to Keel, a couple of wives attended once and were bored to tears over the meandering conversation and wine-geek talk:

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Because Robert Foley was the evening's big-name guest, he was allowed to ignore the "no domestics" theme and offered two of his own, including the well-regarded Claret.



"This is like a diaper in a bottle." "South African wines are kicking ass tonight." "It's a Left Bank wine. That's going to be my guess every time."

About halfway through, the group breaks for dinner: pizza, pasta, salad and bread from a nearby restaurant. There's no fancy cooking here tonight, although King brings out china and linens. More wine is poured.

We learn that there's no secret password to join the wine club, just a common love of the grape. Martin Wollman, an insurance agent, is a frequent customer of both Ellerbe and Put a Cork In It and travels frequently to wine country. Herd, the Fort Worth doctor, learned to appreciate wine when he was a resident at UCLA. "I belong to groups like this in Dallas and Arlington, too. I met Richard when Ellerbe opened, since I just work down the street."

They've had four major winemakers drop in; Robert Foley makes five. Foley's been making wine for more than 20 years and is a frequent visitor to Texas. He's in town for a sold-out wine dinner on another night at Ellerbe but has dropped by this evening with one of the local reps. His California-made wines are the only ringers of the night, but no one complains when they get to sample his cabernet and claret. The guys sitting next to him are stunned to learn who's been their drinking companion all evening.



The evening winds down, and the wine glasses are collected and taken to Ellerbe's kitchen. Tables are pushed back into place and money collected for the night's grub.

There are no prizes for correct guesses, save for sampling a special bottle or two from someone's cellar and learning where you can get the best fried chicken in town.

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