

BYOB returns : Unique S.B. wine dinner experience aims to be affordable

GABE SAGLIE, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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"I want to be the low-price leader."

Leslie Thomas makes no qualms about it: She wants to make her revamped "BYOB Wine & Dine" culinary series the most affordable in town. And at \$50 per person — which includes a multicourse meal, the ability to mingle with winemakers and the chance to taste dozens of wines — it probably is. Attendees are required to bring just one item to dinner: a bottle of wine.

In this case, BYOB stands for Bring Your Own Bottle. The idea struck Ms. Thomas after she attended a public dinner in Santa Cruz several years ago. When she returned home to Santa Barbara, she got the inspired series off the ground, and it was a big success. It featured 47 dinners in its first run, from February 2008 to November 2011, most of them monthly, and all of them sell-outs.

Getting diners involved — requiring them to bring a bottle to match the meal's theme and to share with their fellow gourmets — was key to that success.

"These dinners are highly interactive," says the entrepreneurial Ms. Thomas, who creatively describes herself as a wine consumption specialist. "Bringing a bottle of wine instantly gets you engaged and it spurs discussion."

The original BYOB run ended when the series' host restaurant, Spiritland, closed its doors; Ms. Thomas says the owner plans to open a new restaurant soon on the East Victoria Street spot. On BYOB nights, Spiritland would be converted for the first hour into a lounge, where unique cheeses were doled out for sampling and the night's first wine bottles were popped open. With a quick shift of chairs, the dining room would then be turned into family-style seating, an arrangement made to emphasize the night's social slant. "It encouraged interaction, like having a dinner party at your own house," says Ms. Thomas. "Except you're not doing any of the cleaning up!

"And we'd have the occasional tourist, but it was mostly all locals, which always gave it a real community feel," she adds. "It varied, too: We could have couples or we'd have women coming on their own or there'd be larger groups coming to celebrate a birthday. Our largest group once was 11 people."

Ms. Thomas spent several months looking for a new host restaurant until she decided on Max's Cucina, located along State Street in Santa Barbara's San Roque neighborhood. Partnering with a lower-profile eatery was by design, as it would stand to benefit most from the series' publicity.

"I love the underdogs," says Ms. Thomas, who admits "very few people know it's open for dinner." The casual dining spot widely known for its breakfast and lunch fare for decades began upscale Italian dinner service Tuesday through Saturday nights just last year; it includes a sophisticated selection of wines. The restaurant's kitchen will open an extra night each month for BYOB dinners — which will be held 6 to 9 p.m. on designated Sundays — and create a multicourse meal to complement the night's featured wine.

Max's Cucina's larger dining room will allow Ms. Thomas to boost the attendance limit by 20 people to 68. As before, diners will be asked to bring a "nice bottle for every two people," as Ms. Thomas puts it, defining "nice" as a wine priced at a minimum of \$15. But she admits many guests bring a second find to share, and "they tend to bring something better (than \$15) since it's a bit like showing off — sharing something special with someone else."

The series' opening night dinner, on April 29, is already sold out. The evening will feature winemaker Brett Escalera, who produces award-winning wines for the Consilience and Tre Anelli labels. The night's theme will be a comparative look at zinfandels from Paso Robles and Sonoma. Mr. Escalera, who's been making a zin and the occasional zin port since 1998, will focus on the age of grapevines in both regions. With many

Sonoma zinfandels, sometimes grown on vines planted 90 years ago or more, "you can get these big, blockbuster wines, with big flavors," says Mr. Escalera. Comparatively, "most of Paso is very young." On the premier BYOB night, the winemaker will be pouring his latest zin release, a 2007 vintage sourced from the celebrated Rhodes Vineyard in Redwood Valley, located in Mendocino County.

Reservations are already being taken for next month's BYOB night, set for May 20 and featuring Jaffurs Wine; the night's star grape will be petite sirah.

When the attendance list fills up, Ms. Thomas will start a wait list, which she encourages interested diners to request; last season, several waiting lists led to a second scheduled session. BYOB in June will spotlight champagnes and sparkling wines with Riverbench winemaker Clarissa Nagy; in July, the focus will be on Alsatian whites, like Riesling and gewürztraminer, with winemaker Graham Tatomer, producer of Tatomer Wines and assistant winemaker at Melville.

email: life@newspress.com

IF YOU GO

BYOB dinners will be held monthly 6 to 9 p.m. on designated Sundays at Max's Cucina, 3514 State St. Each event features a multicourse meal, winemaker discussion and dozens of wines provided by guests. Cost is \$50; bring one bottle per party of two. For reservations, call 898-9121.