

Bottle Talk

After 30,000 bottles of wine, Mike Short still loves his job

STORY DAVID BOLLING
PHOTO ROBBI PENGELLY

Clearly, Mike Short has a problem. The man drinks 20 to 30 different wines a week. Over the space of a year that pencils out to more than 1,300 bottles. Quick, you're thinking, somebody call rehab, he's putting away almost four bottles a day.

But wait. His eyes are clear, his face isn't road-mapped with veins, and his mind is sharp as a corkscrew. Besides, he doesn't actually drink all those wines, he just tastes them. Poor Mike. But hey, if you're going to have a problem, this is a pretty good one to have.

Walk through the racks at Sonoma Market, or Glen Ellen Village Market, and you come face-to-bottle with Mike's work. He's the wine buyer, and he's been doing it for 22 years. The bottles you see and the prices you pay are the product of Mike's judgment and taste which, he hopes, are reflections of your judgment and taste—what you like and what you can afford.

"I don't think I have a particularly sophisticated palate," he says. "But I think I have fairly representative tastes, and I know what I like."

But don't let that fool you. Mike is anything but a wine rube. He knows more about varietals, appellations and terroir than you or I ever will. It's just that he's refreshingly free of pretension and subscribes to the Italian adage, "If a glass of wine invites a second, the wine is good."

It's a sound rule but it needs to be amended to include the caveat, "Especially if it's cheap," as we'll see in a moment.

There's a temptation to ask Mike for his top 10 favorite wines, but how do you sort



through two decades and maybe 30,000 bottles? Far easier to request the current top 10 list from his stores. So here's a rough calculation, based on sales volume over the past year.

Mike's short Top 10 list (by label)

- Crane Lake
- Grand Cru
- Kenwood Vineyards red and white table wines
- Robledo Sauvignon Blanc
- Edna Valley Vineyards Chardonnay
- Pepi Sauvignon Blanc
- Valley of the Moon Chardonnay
- Benziger Chardonnay
- Cline Cellars Viognier
- Sonoma Market red and white table wines

Four more wines "on the cusp"

- Cline Cellars California Zinfandel
- Joel Gott Syrah
- Laurier Cabernet
- McManis Petite Sirah

Some secrets need to be revealed here: Crane Lake, Grand Cru and Laurier are all Bronco labels created by the budget wine czar and father of Two-Buck Chuck,

Fred Franzia. (The Laurier cabernet, says Mike, actually uses Alexander Valley fruit.) Sonoma Market label wines are popular in part because they're made by Kenwood Vineyards. Most of the wines on the list sell for under \$10 so, clearly, price drives popularity. As does a summer season conducive to chilled chards.

If you throw out price, what's Mike's best-selling wine over \$25?

"That would be the Rombauer Vineyards Chardonnay. It's the most consistent seller."

OK, that's what the public likes. What about Mike?

"If I had to choose one wine, I would probably choose a nice pinot or a syrah. With whites, I love the New Zealand sauvignon blancs."

And if price were no object?

"That would be the 2005 Tandem Auction Block Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir. Greg La Follette is the winemaker. He brought me over a sample and said, 'You don't have to buy it, I just want you to taste it, see what you think.' I tried it and I flipped. I said, 'I'll make room for it.' But he only made about 400 cases."

And, alas, they're almost all gone... **S**