



DRINKING

YOUR VERY OWN VINTAGE

Make-it-yourself bottles mean you can personally guarantee you'll serve no wine before its time. by ANNEMARIE CONTE

MUCH AS DO-IT-YOURSELF generations from the past home-brewed beer, scores of young professionals are now trying their hand at wine-making. And, just as home-brewers terrorized their friends and neighbors with their suds until they got it right, today's amateur vintner's have to go through a fair amount of trial and error before their rocket fuel tastes more like rocket juice. "I'm learning more and more each time we do it so that my cousins and I can continue the tradition," says Anthony Alagia, 29, whose Italian grandfather was taught by his grandfather. Every fall, Anthony's family gathers in Secaucus, New Jersey, to eat a big Italian meal, drink wine, and de-stem and crush 10 crates — about 220 pounds — of zinfandel grapes that they turn into 30 gallons of table wine.

If, like the Alagias, you like the idea of your own vintage, there are essentially three approaches. The first is for those who don't have the time, space, family tradition, or stamina to pore over issues of *Wine Maker* magazine

and go solo for the entire process. "I'd never make wine at home. That would be like assembling my own car," says Rod Burns, 37. Instead, Burns uses Crushpad (crushpadwine.com), a San Francisco-based winery that oversees the entire process, from choosing the grapes to creating the bottle's label, for people who want to make their own with professional equipment. Companies such as Carafe Winemakers (carafewinemakers.com), Vintner's Cellar (vintnerscellar.com), and Wine Not (winenotinternational.com) offer similar programs at locations throughout the United States and Canada.

Ron Wagner, a 38-year-old IT consultant, paid Crushpad nearly \$8,000 to make his first barrel (that's 300 bottles' worth) — not cheap, but in addition to being able to put his own name on the label, Wagner has already received orders for his 2006 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, at \$27 per bottle, before the wine has even fermented.

The second approach is a baby step toward going it alone. Instead of grapes, start with a \$100 kit that includes specially bottled grape juice from an online shop such as E.C. Kraus (eckraus.com) or the Grape and Granary (thegrape.net) to avoid the messier parts of the process and increase your initial success rate. The third (and most ambitious) approach is to buy some grapes through a reputable local supplier. Everything else, from crusher to barrels, is also available online for about \$1,000. The process is pretty much the same for all wines. After the grapes are crushed and de-stemmed, place the mixture, called must, in a small tub and combine it with sulfites to kill the wild yeast. Twenty-four hours later, add in cultured yeast to ferment the must, then "punch down" the skins that float to the top (mix them back into the must) twice a day for a week. At the end of the week, check the sugar levels and use a press to remove the juice from the skins and pulp. At this stage, the wine will be alcoholic but probably won't taste great. Finally, the juice is poured into a wooden barrel (or a plastic or glass container called a carboy, with oak wood chips) for secondary fermentation. A few wines can be bottled and drunk in a matter of months, but others, like cabernet sauvignon, really need to age as long as two years.

A SIMPLER OPTION: WINE BLENDING

For those who love wine but aren't up for the commitment required to make their own, wine blending is an easier customization, allowing control over what's in the bottle without all of the hassle and mess. "People are trying to get more involved with their wine," says Don Sritong, corporate sommelier at Just Grapes wine shop in Chicago. "We're putting the theory that wine needs to be complicated on its head." Sritong's seminars allow customers to replicate what professional vintners do by taking several different varietals and, using graduated cylinders and other scientific equipment, mix them together to create a wine perfectly suited for their own taste. Just Grapes has a \$120 "Fusebox" blending kit that comes with five bordeaux varietals of wine and everything you need to do a home-blending session with friends (justgrapes.net). The Blending Cellar (blendingcellar.com) also sells kits online, and dozens of wineries, like Joseph Phelps in California, offer on-site blending workshops. For a catchall source offering seminars and classes, check out the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts in Napa (copia.org).

