



Business

'Passion for wine' spurs entrepreneur Behnke's debut of The Wine Barn

Wine enthusiast looks to change the way Northwoods residents buy their wines

By Eric A. Johnson
of The Lakeland Times

"When it comes to wine, I tell people to throw away the vintage charts and invest in a corkscrew. The best way to learn about wine is the drinking."

— Alexis Lichine (1913-1989)

Taking a page from famed French wine writer and entrepreneur Alexis Lichine, Presque Isle resident Eric Behnke is on a one-man mission to change the way Northwoods residents and visitors buy their wine with his experiential, hands-on "Wine Barn" in downtown Manitowish Waters.

Looking to remove the fear, misconceptions, intimidation and snobbery long associated with good wines, Behnke is working to "demystify" wines for oenophiles from novice to connoisseur with his warm, inviting and relaxing rustic Northwoods retail shop, where cork-popping sampling is the daily name of the game.

"I have a passion for wine," said Winchester native Behnke, an alumnus of North Lakeland School and Lakeland Union High School. "I wanted to change the way people shop for wines ... The only true way to decide if you like a wine is to taste it."

Looking to differentiate The Wine Barn from other Northwoods wine retailers, Behnke makes samples of three wines available to customers daily.

"I think it's important to sample wines," he said. "The best way for people to find out what wines they enjoy is by actually tasting it. You can't do that at any other store in the area."

The Wine Barn also hosts monthly wine-tasting events on first Saturdays from 4-6 p.m., centered around specific themes, regions or price points.

"The crowds have been great," Behnke said of the response. "They're fun events. It's a good way to spend a couple of hours on the weekend."

The next monthly wine tasting event, slated for Saturday, April 4, will feature a

recession-spurred "Value Night" look at six quality wines selling for under \$10.

"People are still drinking wines, but they're looking for a good deal," Behnke said.

Entrepreneurial aspirations meet interest in wines

Desiring to be closer to family, avid Northwoods sportsman Behnke returned to the Lakeland area last summer after a decade away that included a seven-year U.S. Navy stint along the eastern seaboard, government contracting work in Germany and engineering field service work in Afghanistan.

During his extensive travels, Behnke became interested in wines, visiting wineries and developing a particular passion for Cabernet and Shiraz wines.

Returning home to the Northwoods, Behnke combined entrepreneurial aspirations with his deep interest in wines, opening The Wine Barn in a vacant downtown Manitowish Waters retail shop at 75 Hwy. W.

"It was a natural fit," he said, noting The Wine Barn fills a "unique niche" in the Lakeland area as a dedicated wine shop.

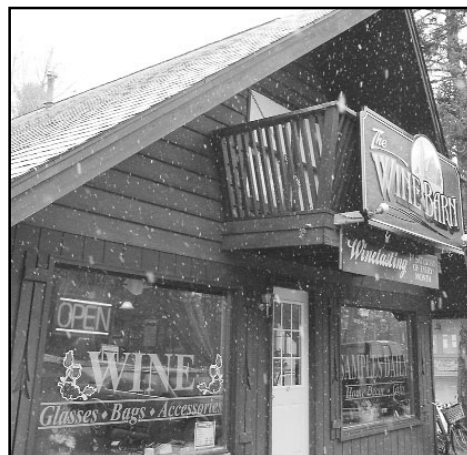
Since its Jan. 24 debut, The Wine Barn's has quickly developed a loyal customer following across the Northwoods.

"It (The Wine Barn) has been very well received," Behnke said, noting the store draws from as far afield as Minocqua, Springstead, Rhinelander and Ironwood, Mich. "It's exceeded my expectations."

Extensive selection offered

The Wine Barn carries one of the Lakeland area's most extensive wine selections, encompassing vintages from ten foreign countries and a number of America's major wine-making regions, including California, Washington, Oregon, New Mexico and Wisconsin.

"Every state in the U.S. now has a



Located in the heart of downtown Manitowish Waters at 75 Hwy. W, just minutes east of Hwy. 51, The Wine Barn features everything for the novice to connoisseur oenophile — more than 200 foreign and domestic wines, glassware, accessories, home décor and gift items. Bringing a new twist to Northwoods wine buying, The Wine Barn offers three daily samples, as well as popular themed wine-tasting events on first Saturdays from 4-6 p.m.

Eric A. Johnson photo

winery," Behnke said. "There's a misconception that all the good wines are from California. There are good wines being made all over the U.S."

At The Wine Barn's March wine tasting event, for example, Washington State vintages from Chateau St. Michelle took top Customer Choice honors in the Merlot and Pinot Gris categories.

Responsive to customer suggestions and requests, Behnke has expanded The

Wine Barn's wine inventory from 140 opening day wine selections on Jan. 24 to more than 200 different wines today.

"We've had a lot of expansion in a short amount of time," he noted. "We're always open to customer recommendations and custom orders."

Badger State vintages are well-represented at the The Wine Barn, with Behnke currently offering 15 Wisconsin wine selections.

Popular wineries featured include several Door County vintners and Prairie du Sac's popular Wollersheim Winery.

Looking to simplify the wine-buying process for customers, The Wine Barn arranges its wine inventory by flavor and body, rather than the typical categorization by varietals and region.

In addition to offering a quality wine for every taste, The Wine Barn also offers a quality wine for every pocketbook, an important consideration for many in the current recessionary economy.

"There's a misconception that wine shops are high-end places," Behnke said. "We offer a good selection of quality wines at a variety of different price points — from \$5.99 and up."

And customers who sign up for Behnke's "E-Mail Club" are eligible for a variety of Wine Barn perks, including advance notice of new wine offerings and special online pricing deals of 40-60 percent off the store's "Wine of the Month" selection.

Wine — and much more

While wine is the headliner at The Wine Barn, the store also offers an extensive selection of complementary wine-related merchandise.

"I wanted The Wine Barn to be more than just a wine store," he said. "I want-

ed it to be an experience."

The Wine Barn offers a large variety of wine accessories, including Vinturi wine aerators, imported Austrian Riedel stemware and Metrokane's popular "Rabbit" corkscrews. The store also features a broad selection of wine and bar tool kits and caddies, wine racks, ice buckets, wine cradles, bottle stoppers, wine buying guides and wine gift bags and totes.

The Wine Barn also stocks a wide array of wine-inspired home décor accessories, including wine cork bulletin board and trivet kits, framed art prints and humorous signs.

The store also offers an extensive line of unique furnishings and home accessories crafted from retired oaken wine casks, including bistro tables, benches, stools, cheese boards, cheese racks, votive candle holders, tea light candle holders, wall clocks and tabletop Lazy Susans.

By popular customer request, Behnke said he will soon be adding a variety of complementary foods and cheeses.

Learn more

The Wine Barn is located just minutes east of U.S. Hwy. 51 at 75 Hwy. W in downtown Manitowish Waters. Cash, checks and most major credit cards are accepted, including MasterCard, Visa, Discover and American Express.

Current hours are Fridays from 4:30-8 p.m., Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sundays. Summer hours will be 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. seven days a week.

For more information, call 715-543-2244, e-mail to info@ewinebarn.com or visit The Wine Barn online at www.ewinebarn.com.

Eric Johnson can be reached at ejohnson@lakelandtimes.com.



Eric A. Johnson photo

In addition to an extensive line of foreign and domestic wines, the Wine Barn offers a wide array of complementary wine-related accessories and home-décor items, including folk art, barrelhead Lazy Susans and tabletop wine cradles.

The Wine Barn's inviting and relaxing rustic Northwoods showroom features more than 200 foreign and domestic wine labels, as well as a complementary array of accessories, including imported Austrian Riedel glassware. The Wine Barn carries 15 Wisconsin wines, including vintages from several Door County vintners and Prairie du Sac's popular Wollersheim Winery. Looking to simplify and demystify the wine buying process, The Wine Barn arranges wines by flavor and body, rather than the typical groupings by varietals and regions.



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