

Wine by Wire

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For a while there, it looked like we were never going to have to leave the house again, satisfying our need for everything from dog food to dog-eared paperbacks by surfing the Internet. Now, most of the companies promising fast, fast service and low, low prices electronically are gone, gone, gone. But a few have survived the shakeout and even prospered by supplying a service that neither Wal-Mart nor Amazon.com could. One such enterprise, it seems, is Garagiste.

In hipster French, *un garagiste* is a lone-wolf winemaker operating outside the enological establishment: the system of *châteaux*, *néo-républicains*, and winemaking tradition. Garagiste is also bucking a system: the cozy way importers, brokers, distributors, and sometimes even retailers stand between winemakers and wine consumers, each taking a nice little slice of the action.

Physically, Garagiste is a humble (but carefully climate-controlled) bay in a SoDo warehouse. But most of Jon Rimmerman's 4,000 or 5,000 current customers will never see the place: They log on to www.garagistewine.com, peruse Rimmerman's 60-page-plus online catalog, and place their orders.

Rimmerman's not trying to challenge Costco for the mass-market wine drinker, but he does emulate Costco in one area: prices. His markup is so low that even when you reckon in shipping, prices are more than competitive with brick-and-mortar wine shops.

Of course, nonvirtual wine shops have flesh-and-blood salespersons to take counsel with on your purchase. But Rimmerman's online catalog is so meticulously annotated that you often end up with more information than you might get from a harried store clerk, and if you want to engage in e-mail discourse with the boss, Rimmerman is only too pleased to oblige.

Garagiste owes its very existence to e-mail. He began sharing his interest and knowledge with other enthusiasts via newsgroups and listservs almost as soon as such electronic bulletin boards came into being. When he decided to go into business online 18 months ago, his former e-mail correspondents were an invaluable resource for a start-up entrepreneur with limited capital. They already knew him, trusted him, and shared his interest in serious, handmade wines redolent of the earth they come from. One of the great pleasures of opening his warehouse to the public has been the chance to meet some folks he knew only by their handles. They even eat and tip a glass together. Electrons are great, but they lack bouquet.

GET THIS!

Is there anything as frustrating as going to a boutique winery tasting, sipping something superb, and then, when you reach for your wallet, hearing "Sorry, it's already sold out"? When the wines are as good as Bob Betz's twin 2000 syrahs la C^o Rousse and la Serenne, nothing. So it's good to discover that the Betz Family Winery reserved a limited quantity of both for release to serious wine shops and restaurants this week. Call your wine merchant and get ahead of the crowd. Expect to pay around \$35.

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