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Employee Dennis Felipe prepares cases of wine for pickup at the Garagiste warehouse in Seattle. Customers can retrieve their wine there or have it shipped. (Mike Kane / P-I)

Small Retail: Unusual places, unusual wines

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By DAN RICHMAN
P-I REPORTER

You may never have heard of Garagiste, a Seattle company claiming to be the state's second-largest seller of wine, after Costco.

Odds are, too, that if you read a single e-mail from this unusual retailer, you'd be a customer.

Founder Jon Rimmerman, 41, sends up to three e-mails a day to 10,000 people worldwide who have requested them.

Traveling half the year with his life and work partner and a young daughter, the native Chicagoan seeks out unusual wines in unusual places.

Sometimes sitting in the middle of a vineyard, he types out enticingly descriptive e-mails on his BlackBerry.

The wines he describes can be ordered with a click, charged to a credit card on file, and delivered anywhere in the U.S. or picked up from a nondescript refrigerated warehouse in Sodo.

That's it. No advertising, no marketing, no PR. Not even a storefront or a Web site offering product.

The only similarity between Rimmerman's family-owned business and a conventional wine store is shelving holding odd lots for sale in the warehouse.

But the business works. Garagiste -- pronounced "gah-rah-ZHEEST" but often just called "The Garage" -- sells an estimated average of 50,000 bottles a month. That means annual dollar sales in eight figures and steady profits supporting a staff of 12. The company is experiencing annual double-digit sales growth, Rimmerman said.

Wines are competitively priced, said one customer. A week's offering includes some wines at \$8-\$10 a bottle, some at \$15-\$20, and some at \$20 and above. Anyone can sign up to receive e-mail offers, with no obligation to buy, at garagistewine.com.

Rimmerman's huge enthusiasm for wine -- plus his gift for describing its qualities and the culture, geology and geography of the places it's produced -- propel the business, enticing even nonwine drinkers.

Who could resist buying after getting this e-mail (excerpted below) sent earlier this week?

"When a few drops of this were dripped into the palm of my hand (as is the tradition) and I sampled it by (yes) licking it from my palm, it was like going to wine communion. The only word I could think of to describe the wine and the moment was insanity.

"This wine is insane. Is it even wine? Whatever it is, I don't want the experience to end.

"If you recall, (the winemaker) has a colony of bats that have taken a special liking to the prized dried grapes hanging in the rafters of his alpine barn. Assuming the bats do not eat the grapes, each remaining piece of shriveled fruit is taken down from the ceiling and pressed with gravity. The resulting liquid is what I would call half wine and half something from a J.R.R. Tolkien novel.

"This is as close as you will get to liquefied 'side of mountain' mixed with molten plums, cinnamon apples and a brown fruit concoction topped with molasses, caramel and wild flower honey."

That wine -- a 2005 Cotes de Jura "Spirale" Passerille (Tissot) -- sold for \$58.90 for a 375-milliliter bottle.

Among Rimmerman's latest finds is Frank Cornelissen, a Norwegian winemaker who is working old vines growing in the deep-black volcanic ash and rock on the flanks of Mount Etna, the active volcano in Sicily.

Cornelissen uses so-called biodynamic techniques, which can include stuffing powdered quartz into a cow horn and burying it in the soil. Rimmerman said he believes those techniques work.

In producing his 2005 MunJebel #3 red wine, (\$58 for 750 milliliters), Cornelissen presses not just the fruit but also the stems and stalks, creating what Rimmerman called "some of the most natural wines being produced in the world. They're very eccentric. If you can imagine biting into solid rocks and minerals, that's what they taste of."

Doesn't sound quite as yummy as molten plums. But Garagiste tries to expose customers to the unusual.

Rimmerman said he got the idea for an e-mail-only business in about



zoom

Mike Kane / P-I

Garagiste employee Matt Burris samples a

1999. But Garagiste has really taken off in the past three years, said general manager Pat Maloy, 38, who supervises the receipt and delivery of the warehouse's roughly 100,000 bottles of wine. About 70 percent of sales are shipped out of state, and nearly all in-state sales are picked up at the warehouse, he said.

Garagiste employee Matt Burns samples a pinot noir at the company's warehouse in Seattle. The company's founder markets his wine through daily e-mails to his customers.

The limited-quantity wines are sometimes sold on a firstcome, first-served basis, but in other instances, the quantity ordered by the earliest customers will be reduced so all customers can get at least one bottle.

Garagiste customers tend to be somewhat advanced wine drinkers and collectors. Most are male.

Chris McKeever, 47, a retired air traffic controller from Auburn, came down to Garagiste's warehouse this week to pick up 93 bottles of wine that had accumulated over the past three months.

"The pricing is well below retail 95 percent of the time, and the information you get from the descriptions is making me learn more about parts of the world," McKeever said.

Competition comes mainly from conventional wine stores -- but they aren't a real threat, Rimmerman said, because they don't typically get out and sample wines. Instead, they tend to rely on importers to supply them and inform them about wines, he said.

Independent wine writer Paul Gregutt said he respects Rimmerman's passion and work ethic.

But, he added, Rimmerman "is in the business of selling wine. There's an inherent agenda in his reviews: to sell wine. So you have to take that into account."

Rimmerman, who was trained as a lawyer, acknowledges that combining reviewing and retailing is "a taboo in the wine industry."

But, he counters, "I could always recommend 20 other wines I'd make more money on. It's critical that we have trust between me and my customers. I'm an advocate for their best interests."

IF YOU GO

GARAGISTE

707 S. Lander, Seattle

206-264-1494

garagistewine.com

Hours: 11 a.m.- 6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 11 a.m.- 3 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday and Monday.



P-I reporter Dan Richman can be reached at 206-448-8032 or danrichman@seattlepi.com.

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