

Non-professionals are getting chance to make their own Bordeaux wines

■ WINE

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If you were given the chance to make your own wine, without the risk and expense of buying a vineyard, would you take it? Judging by the crowd in the cellars of Chateau Teyssier, it's a pretty irresistible idea. At first glance, this is a typical open day at a beautiful estate five minutes outside the medieval village of Saint Emilion, on the right bank of Bordeaux. The difference is the guests are not here to taste the chateau's wines, but to sample the first results of their own take on the acclaimed 2009 vintage.

Various nationalities and ages are gathered around tables bearing bottles marked merlot, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc - grape varieties they have chosen, grown in plots they have selected, and are now being blended and aged. Most of the wines will be bottled a year from now, under names and labels invented and designed by each participant.

These amateur winemakers - taking a break from their day jobs as lawyers, teachers, IT consultants, even actors - are making a minimum of one barrel of wine each (which works out at 300 bottles or 25 cases) with Crushpad, an American company that has recently set up in Bordeaux. The cost of a barrel starts at €6,600 (HK\$65,000) or €22 per bottle, and the opportunity is open to anyone who is willing to sign up. This is citizen winemaking in action - pretty revolutionary for a region whose most famous winemakers are often descended from aristocratic families who have made wine in the region for centuries.

This weekend is the annual Client Mashup, an opportunity for barrel owners to head to Bordeaux, often for the first time, to check on the progress of their wines, which, until this point, they have just been following online. The grapes were picked about six months earlier (clients are welcome to help with harvest, but most don't have the time), and this is the chance to check that the flavours are on track and to make any tweaks to the blends before the wine begins its final ageing process. The mood is lively. "I never expected winemaking to be so emotional - it really is like creating your own baby," says one client, from Ukraine.

Maybe not entirely surprisingly, there are few French participants. "We just had two Parisians this year," says Stephen Bolger, CEO of Crushpad Bordeaux, "and nobody from Bordeaux." Rather, the mix seems mainly to be American, British and northern European, mostly young professionals making wine with friends who share the barrel costs between them. Among the crowd is Bernice Liu, Chinese-Canadian actress and singer who is known not only for her extensive work with TVB (SEHK: [0511](#)), but also for films such as *The Legend is Born: Ip Man*.

"I first heard about Crushpad through the internet," Liu says. "Not knowing anything about the process other than what I did and didn't like [to drink], I started surfing the Net.

"Someone like me who isn't a professional wine connoisseur bases taste on instinct. But the guys at Crushpad were great - you have the say as to how involved in the process you want to be."

Liu started making wine with Crushpad in California, which is where the concept began in 2004. At first it was

based in San Francisco, with grapes from Napa Valley vineyards and with the aim, in the words of founder Michael Brill, of "enabling anyone with a serious interest in wine to participate in the magic of winemaking".

Today, it has moved base to Napa and has a global list of clients making their own "custom crush". Although most are wine enthusiasts with no previous experience, many of the wines have received scores of 90+ from critics such as Robert Parker and the *Wine Spectator*. In 2008, Crushpad opened its outpost in Bordeaux and the temptation proved too much for Liu to resist.

"In wine, the ultimate thing is Bordeaux, so to travel here and to experience winemaking has been amazing," Liu says.

In Napa, she made a single varietal chardonnay and merlot, while in Bordeaux she's making a white and a red blend. "I just kind of go with what I feel like."

More than 90 per cent of Crushpad clients have no previous experience of winemaking, and the vast majority have no intention of giving up their day jobs. They can follow the progress of their barrels throughout the year either by visiting the vineyards and cellars - based at Chateau Teyssier but using grapes grown at nine selected plots around the region, or by logging in to Crushnet, an online tool that allows clients to make key decisions about the style of wine they want at each step of the process. The fruit (with a choice of merlot, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc) is sourced from high-quality partner vineyards such as Pey Labrie in Canon-Fronsac, Le Ruisseau in Cotes de Castillon, Grand Pontet in St Emilion, Grand Cathelie in Pauillac and Chateau Le Coteau in Margaux. The resulting wines will be bottled as AOC Bordeaux or, in some cases, AOC St Emilion.

Inexperience is not an issue - the company has put together a detailed guide to winemaking that explains what effect each of your choices will have on the final wine starting from the basics, such as getting a round, fleshy flavour from the merlot grape, or a more elegant, tannic and masculine edge from cabernet sauvignon; to the more subtle decisions such as the toasting level of your barrel and the amount of time you want to keep your grape skins in contact with the juice.

To help clients define their wine style, Stephen Bolger has assembled a team of leading local winemakers and consultants. Jonathan Maltus, owner of Chateau Teyssier, where the Crushpad facilities are based, is a renowned winemaker who has won acclaim for his micro-cuvees such as Le Dome and Les Asturies. Clients also have access to the expertise of consultants Eric Boissenot and Stephane Derenoncourt. Between them, they make wine for some of the most illustrious names in Bordeaux, including Clos Fourtet, Chateau La Gaffeliere, Domaine de Chevalier, Chateau Lafite, Chateau Latour, Chateau Margaux and Chateau Mouton Rothschild.

With this expertise as back-up, clients piece together the type of wine they want. "Our vineyard list is like a puzzle," says Bolger. "Each vineyard we select must have different characteristics to offer clients, depending on whether they prefer a left bank or right bank style, or anything in between."

Bolger is visiting Hong Kong this month to meet his growing client base from the region. "For once, we are followers, not leaders, here. More than most markets, Hong Kong and Chinese consumers have four key hallmarks of the typical Crushpad citizen-winemaker - one of the world's deepest appreciations for Bordeaux red wines, an intense entrepreneurial spirit, a deep curiosity and a continuing thirst for experience. With that profile, the jump to creating your own premium Bordeaux is not that difficult."

Most Crushpad clients are making wine just for fun, or for a special event such as an anniversary or wedding, but some choose to sell their bottles. So will we be able to buy the Bernice Liu Bordeaux blend?

"I thought about incorporating the wine I make with a local charity ... but I want to try it first to make sure it really is

`me' before I start sharing it with the world," she says.

She might find it's a difficult decision - London friends Adrian Chopin and Richard Perris had intended to sell half but say, "Now we're tasting it, it's just too good to part with."

Crushpad is organising tasting events in Hong Kong in the week of Sep 13, including Sep 17 and 18 at Cipriani, hosted by Stephen Bolger. As all tastings are limited to 15 people per session. To book, please contact Stephen@crushpadwine.com or call +33 6 26 01 57 69