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A Las Vegas Wine Sampling Pours on the Music

Sin City's monthly Rock 'n' Roll Wine mixes vino and song to create a cozy atmosphere for connoisseurs and novices alike.

By Kevin Capp, Special to the Los Angeles Times
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For those of us who love wine but whose knowledge of it can be summed up with "Well, I did see 'Sideways,'" and whose worst fear is to attend a tasting stocked with wine snobs, the monthly Las Vegas party Rock 'n' Roll Wine serves as a chilled-out, grapey refuge. But if you know wine, don't worry: "Snobs" are invited too.



Indeed, part of the appeal of Rock 'n' Roll Wine, which bounces from venue to venue, is that everyone is welcome: novices and experts, oenophiles and casual tipplers. But what really draws people isn't just the carefree attitude toward wine, it's also the music and cozy atmosphere it creates. Of course, that third glass of Sauvignon Blanc doesn't hurt.

Witness the scene at the Golden Nugget's pool on April 27. On the stage, positioned across from the 200,000-gallon shark tank, is the opening act, the Heavie Heads, jamming a reggae tune as satisfying as a newly uncorked bottle of wine.

Revelers cruise around, catching samples in their mini-plastic goblets, while toothy gray predators swim in bright blue waters. Island rhythms, disposable wine glasses and carnivorous pets? Told you it was chilled out.

The music is just as essential as the vino, because the type of tunes played determines the type of wine served. Rather than pair this or that wine with this or that cheese, for example, Rock 'n' Roll Wine founder Chris Hammond and his partner Sonny Barton took their concept in a decidedly unorthodox direction. As a result, what you hear is what you taste.

During this installment where reggae served as the soundtrack, Hammond and Barton came up with "easy sipping" white wines, like the guys' own concoction fermented in their Oregon-based winery, Amplified Wines. Their Reggae Rhapsody's light flavor complements the easygoing grooves.

If you stop by the table that serves Hammond and Barton's bottled baby, you may very well find Barton (it's not hard to do; the guy stands well over 6 feet and is built more like a pro wrestler than a wine connoisseur) pouring for guests, excitedly dropping phrases like "residual sugar" and "fruit forward" to explain its contents. As for that whole matching-music-with-wine thing, Hammond acknowledges it's hardly an exact science. "It's all subjective," he says, adding, "Somebody may think a Marvin Gaye song goes with a Pinot," and somebody else may think sensitive surf rocker Jack Johnson does.





Tonight, there are at least 1,000 people milling about in everything from spit-shined dress shoes to well-worn flip-flops, sampling more than 30 wines from 13 distributors at the swankiest downtown hotel. But when Hammond kicked this off three years ago, he did it with a handful of friends at his house, not at a pool that recently underwent a \$30-million renovation.

After about 17 weeks, what began as a fun way for him to study for his sommelier exam — by playing music while drinking wines from around the world — evolved into a full-scale business his house could no longer contain. Now, Hammond and Barton estimate their smaller events attract about 600 people, while their larger ones see upward of 2,000.

Past locales have included Mandalay Bay hotel-casino's faux beach area and other venues that have a "sizzle," as Barton somewhat cryptically labels their criteria.

While the weather isn't sizzling, the crowd in front of the Golden Nugget's poolside stage could use some cooling down. Headlining act ForTwentyDaze hangs a lazy solo in the air, causing couples to grind up and down and sway back and forth, like ship sails about to sink into the horizon.

They're feeling what Barton calls the "happy buzz" only wine can deliver. It's one reason the diverse crowd — college-age people in shorts, professionals in slacks — doesn't split off into cliques, as in a high school cafeteria.

The folks standing on the third-floor terrace directly above the shark tank are a tad loopy on Aussie imports, and those below are taking generous swigs of vibrant flavors courtesy of Imperial wine. In other words, they're on the same level, even when they're not on the same level.

Standing ankle-deep in the neon blue pool are two older gals posing for a shutterbug. One of them nearly falls over, but the other catches her, laughing doubtlessly because her friend's a klutz, because they're both still dry, and because they're playing photo queens in front of strangers.

Yeah, they've got a happy buzz.

