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*"I want people to know when they come in they are going to find gems they are not going to find somewhere else."*

## Wine For All Seasons

BY ANN TRIEGER

**D**escending the wooden stairs into the subterranean wine cellar at Nantucket's American Seasons feels like stepping into a cave. You'll most likely hit your head on the door frame if you don't duck. This space is a rustic contrast to the gloss of some other wine storage rooms. That's because it doesn't need polish: the racks are filled with close to 5,000 bottles, many from prestigious grape-growing regions in the U.S., several available in small quantities that rarely make their way onto local wine lists.

Orla Murphy-LaScola, co-owner of the restaurant with her husband and the restaurant's head chef, Michael LaScola, makes the selections for a 515-bottle list of American wines. She is a certified sommelier and is working towards earning the title of Master of Wine, perhaps the most prestigious title in the wine trade. The process is rigorous and can take years, but she has already passed three levels of tests of the four required to earn this distinction.

In the meantime, her mission is to search for beautiful wines with limited availability. The list brims with prestigious selections from famous producers, like California cabernets by Heitz Cellar, Opus One,

and Ridge as well as chardonnays made by Kistler and Chateau Montelena.

But her choices also overflow with unusual offerings, some of which have never been sent to Massachusetts before. You'll find the handcrafted Straight Line Tempranillo and Syrah from Jon Grant, an artisanal California winemaker little known on the East Coast. You'll also find Relic Cellar's Apothecary Cabernet and Pinot Noir, a tiny production from a Napa Valley winery.

There are other treasures, like Oregon's Orin Roe Sinister Hand—a blended red—and O'Reily's Pinot Gris—a citrusy white. "I want people to know when they come here that they are going to find gems not found somewhere else," says Murphy-LaScola.

The prices on the list of many of these specialties can top more than \$200 a bottle, but there are also some great buys under \$50. Winemakers on-island for the Nantucket Wine Festival, wine distributors, and oenophiles familiar with the offerings praise the assembly of selections that come from 45 different appellations.

"We're often told that the breadth of our collection is one of the most impressive all-American lists in the

country," says Murphy-LaScola.

So how does this sommelier make such great finds? In February and March, when American Seasons is closed, the couple travel to California and other grape-growing areas in the U.S. on wine-tasting trips. The couple seek out boutique wineries producing a modest amount of high-quality bottles that are not readily available in Massachusetts.

"We do a lot of poking and prodding," says Murphy-LaScola. The couple don't always set up a traditional tasting, but often meet with vintners while they're working.

"Small producers are more like farmers," says Murphy-LaScola. "I like to talk in the vineyard with them, even while they're pruning." These visits have helped forge relationships with the winemakers, who reserve a small allocation for American Seasons.

Many of the wineries the LaScolas visit are small, family operations. On some visits, it's a case of one husband-and-wife team doing business with another.

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*Ann Trieger is a freelance writer from the Boston area.*



ANN TRIEGER