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Seattle retailer Garagiste has national cult following

Garagiste, an off-the-radar, Seattle-based retailer of obscure, often collectible wines, seems to take a certain pleasure in having its customers run a gantlet in order to make a purchase.

Newcomers will have to wrestle, as I did, with Garagiste's lack of signage, weird hours, inscrutable rules and curious approach to wine retailing. "I've never considered us to be retailers," says founder Jon Rimmerman, without a trace of irony (Garagiste is, in fact, a retailer). "Wine-writing is my passion, not wine-selling," he insists. Until a few weeks ago, Garagiste did indeed have no wine shop and no Web site. It does no advertising, and even now is open only for limited hours to those on its mailing list. Apart from a small rack of odd lots and bin ends, there is nothing for sale at the 'shop.'

Yet Garagiste, according to several industry sources, does more business than any wine retailer in the city. And despite being virtually unknown here in hometown Seattle, it has achieved almost legendary status among wine collectors around the country.

Garagiste is the brainchild of Rimmerman, 38, who grew up in a wine- and food-loving family and says his appreciation for fine wine began at age 5. A Chicago native, he holds a law degree, but credits a stint at the first Chicago Starbucks store with teaching him marketing concepts, brand building and how to design and create a cutting-edge business.

Garagiste is nothing if not cutting-edge; the highly personal, opinionated, idealistic and astonishingly successful result of Rimmerman's Starbucks years. It especially appeals to the treasure hunters, those passionate wine collectors who want the wines that no one can get, the wines that the critics haven't yet found, the wines that will get the big scores next year.

But Garagiste is about much more than selling hard-to-find, exotic and collectable wines. Combining the strengths of importer, journalist and retailer, Rimmerman orchestrates its quirky offerings with a confidence that suggests he sees the future of wine-selling differently, perhaps more clearly, than just about anyone else.

Wine-retailing in the U.S. is currently bogged down in a horrendous morass of conflicting rules and regulations, which vary from state to state, and sometimes block to block (been to Houston lately?).

Many date back to the repeal of Prohibition. Internet wine sales, which are challenging the rules, are still being blocked, even here in Washington. But Garagiste does not challenge or skirt any existing regulations. It operates successfully within the confines of Washington's three-tier system, appealing directly to its clientele by the most simple means: e-mail.

Rimmerman travels constantly, and writes constantly, and subscribers to Garagiste's free e-mail list can rely on receiving one or two messages daily. Each message contains an offer to buy a single wine. And it's generally an urgent offer. Sample:

"Dear friends, this offer is simple: Vinaguarena is potentially the most exciting new winery in all of Spain. Their wines are so appealing that I'm not sure we can get enough to satisfy everyone (I tried)."

This particular e-mail goes on to describe the Vinaguarena in rich detail, pausing to take a jab at critic Robert Parker: "Too many wines from Toro are creations to satisfy Parker, but this is different. They've managed to harness the extract and strength of the region without creating a robot or Frankenstein-esque creature that is impossible to drink."

Such passionate pitches may seem over the top, but after reading Rimmerman and occasionally purchasing his recommendations for almost a year, I find that he is remarkably accurate. His descriptions are precise and detailed, his prices terrific, and his discoveries come from almost every corner of the globe.

Garagiste began as a co-op about five years ago, and gradually picked up customers as it refined its philosophy and methodology. Wines are sold one at a time by e-mail only, and the selection process for each wine depends entirely on Rimmerman's wide-ranging palate.

He qualifies his offerings by subjecting them to rigorous scrutiny. In order for Garagiste to sell it, he explains, a wine must fit two or three spokes of criteria: "It has to be best of its type we can find in the world, issues of provenance have to be clear, and we have to be able to sell it at the lowest prices in the U.S."

When he's not on the road, Rimmerman's office is a cold, stark, supremely cluttered space. The walls are composite plywood, painted burgundy. The desks are plain, industrial Formica slabs. Half-consumed wine bottles are scattered everywhere. There's a laptop, telephone and a fax machine. The only adornments are a few photos of his young daughter, Chloe Rose. Chloe is 3 ½ years old. Her first complete sentence, he proudly recalls, was "wine comes from Napa Valley."

Besides the steady stream of e-mail offers, Garagiste subscribers have access to an online blog, a drop-in retail space, an annual blow-out "garage sale" and exclusive wine dinners at trendy restaurants nationwide, all at remarkably reasonable prices. The best way to register is by sending an e-mail to info@garagistewine.com, or call 206-264-1494.

Other retail tidbits

In other retail news, long-time Seattle wine writer and educator Richard Kinssies has returned to his retail roots by opening the Wine Outlet (1701 First Ave. S., 206-652-1311). Housed in a spare, heavily timbered industrial space a block south of Safeco Field, the Wine Outlet is dedicated to the proposition, says Kinssies, that "wine should be good, accessible and cheap."

On hand is a wide selection of old, rare and closed-out wines, culled from importers, wholesalers and wineries around the region, as well as his own extensive cellar. It's no secret that wine importers and wholesalers must annually clear the decks in their warehouses, unloading backed-up older vintages to make room for the new.

Sometimes these older wines are better wines, at better prices, than the new arrivals, and the Wine Outlet concept is to take the best and sell them at bargain prices. Hours are 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Fridays; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays.

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