

FARNESE CRAZY How it suddenly became cool again to drink cheap wine

By KATHARINE HAMER

I was perusing the wine selection at the Cambie Street liquor store when a clerk sidled up to my elbow. "Are you interested in buying some Farnese?" she murmured, in the fevered tones of a small-time crack dealer. "It just came in, it'll be gone

by tomorrow. Do you want a case?" It was the first time I'd ever seen such salesmanship from a government employee.

At \$7.95 a bottle, Farnese sangiovese has become the Vancouver viticultural success story of the year. In the last 12 months, the Liquor Distribution Branch has sold close to 50,000 cases. That makes it the second biggest seller, next to Wolf Blass Yellow

Label, but even more important, Farnese is making it cool to drink cheap wine again. And why not? After all, in France you don't serve the high-end stuff as your *vin de table*.

Farnese's popularity has spread largely by word of mouth, from friend to friend in living rooms across the city, from Commercial Drive to West Van — where they're drinking the stuff "like it's going out of style," according to David Scholefield, senior portfolio manager for the LDB. For a while, trying to find even a single bottle was like searching for the gold wrapper in a Willy Wonka chocolate bar.

Late last year, just as the wave was about to crest, supplies dwindled when incoming stock was held hostage by an American dockworkers' strike. Cases of Farnese sat aboard stalled ships in Seattle, Tacoma, Long Beach and San Francisco.

By the time the wine reached liquor stores, there was "a feeding frenzy," says Scholefield, who greenlighted Farnese's importation.

"The fact that it was unavailable frequently increased its mythic stature," he says. "It generated this maelstrom of word of mouth. We had to order more and more to keep the pipeline full."

He recalls how the Cambie Street store "brought in a full pallet, 56 cases, on a Friday night. It was all piled on the floor. I arrived at 10:30 a.m. the next day and there was one miserable case sitting on the pallet. There was devastation — ripped-up cases all over the place."

The LDB brought Farnese in as part of a program called Red Hot and New. Kickstarted in early 2001, it was designed as a way to introduce consumers to new international wines that were both satisfying in taste and available at a reasonable price.

Started as a pilot program at 12 of the LDB's more "low-key" branches, Red Hot and New has become a huge success. Pat yourselves on the back here, folks — part of that success is due to the fact that B.C. consumers are among the most sophisticated in the world when it comes to wine drinking. We have the highest per capita consumption in North America, and have always supported emerging regions like Chile or South Africa long before anyone else. And it's a growing market: LDB wine revenues were up by over 20 per cent last year.

In the past, though, says wine expert Mark Davidson, "It's been a challenge to get a decent wine under 10 bucks."

The director of wine programs at the Dubrulle Culinary School notes that our fascination with Farnese is indicative of a burgeoning trend.

When people get interested in wine, he says, they start off buying the high-end expensive labels. "Then they think, 'I want to get something I can drink on a daily basis that I don't have to get another mortgage on the house for.'"

"Farnese has some interesting characteristics. It's something you can have with pizza three or four nights a week. They could very easily get jug wines,



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Michele Geris with bottles of Farnese trebbiano (left, a white wine) and sangiovese.

but they want to get something that actually tastes good."

Introducing British Columbians to flavourful wines that won't break the bank is something of a mission for Farnese's importer, Michele Geris. As the owner (with her husband, George Baugh) of Piccolo Mondo restaurant, Geris is accustomed to finding great wines for her customers. She decided in 1999 to start a wine importing business, and found Farnese on what she describes as one of her "hunting trips" to Europe.

Geris brought three Farnese wines to Scholefield's attention: the sangiovese, a primitivo and a white wine, trebbiano — all now available through the LDB. She says she knew instantly that the sangiovese in particular would suit the B.C. market.

A key component in Chianti, the sangiovese grape on its own has an earthy, peppery red cherry flavour. Produced in Ortona, Italy, south of Rome, the Farnese sangiovese is a fruity, medium-bodied wine with "a nice finish in the mouth," says Geris. "It goes with a lot of different foods."

"If I get excited about a product, I have such a good feeling," she says. "I'm almost 90 per cent sure that it can do well. Being a restaurateur, you get to know what clients like. They want quality and they want price. Life is very expensive; it's very expensive to live in Vancouver. It's like the Canadian Riviera: rents are expensive; everything is expensive here, so I don't think you should underestimate the consumer."

A native of St. Tropez, France, Geris grew up in a family of restaurateurs. When she first came to Vancouver, she was shocked by local mealtime habits. "You can't tell me," she says, shaking her head in distaste, "that having a nice piece of steak with a cup of coffee works."

"I think with a good-quality wine at a very reasonable price, you can democratize wine drinking in British Columbia. People can buy their \$25, \$30, \$50 if you want, bottle of wine, for a special meal that they're going to make, but during the week they can have their case of Farnese in the garage and open a bottle, make a lasagne or spaghetti or meatloaf or whatever and have their glass of wine and then cork the bottle; leave it on the counter for the following day, and it's okay, because it's not an investment — it's not like this special thing. I think that's the way wine should be."

Although there are other popular wines in the Red Hot and New program, Scholefield says the Farnese craze is "a unique phenomenon. There hasn't been a wine talked about in B.C. for ages and ages — if ever. People don't typically go out and buy a case of wine after work."

"It's such an unbelievable story that [Geris] pulled this off — it's amazing. It's like a one-woman show. There was an audience for it, and thank God she did this. We should all be thankful."

Katharine Hamer is a Vancouver-based freelance writer. She last wrote for MIX about Paul and Audrey Grescoe's *The Book of Letters*.

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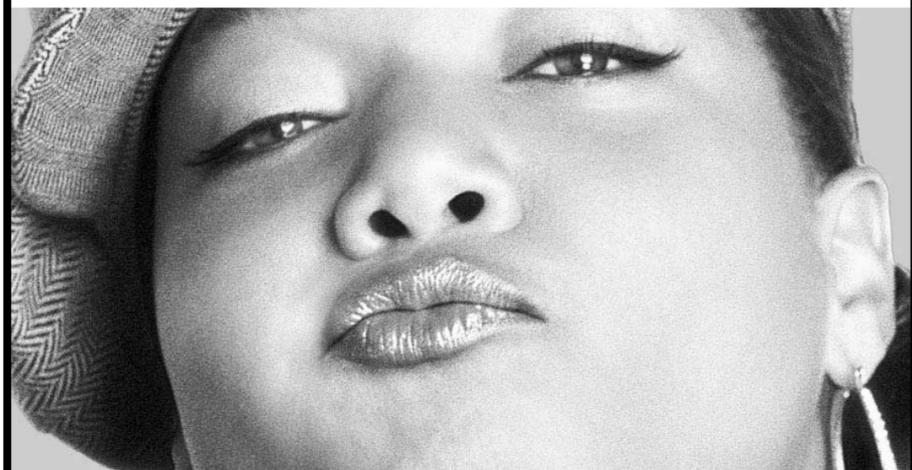
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