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Against Mall Odds

Find your foodie gifts at local boutiques

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

I MAY be a lot of things, but mall rat isn't one of them. So when it comes to buying holiday gifts, or any gifts for that matter, I'd rather eat my own feet than spend time at Oakridge or Valley Fair. You too can easily shop for the food and wine enthusiast in your life without going near an overdecorated mall.



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago

THE PLACE WE OLIVE: Local boutiques like the Olive Bar are the best places to find gifts for your favorite foodies.

The Olive Bar, Campbell

Sometimes you love a store because of the merchandise, sometimes because of the reasonable prices and sometimes, frankly, because the owners just know how to treat their customers right.

My first visit to the Olive Bar—a store devoted to imported oils in all their extra-virgin glory—was during Oktoberfest. Now, I'm the first to admit that coming in for an olive oil tasting when the entirety of downtown Campbell is chugging beer and snarfing bratwurst screams of cognitive dissonance, but I didn't put two and two together until I tried (unsuccessfully) to find a parking space.

When I made my way through the drunken maw to the Olive Bar's soothing storefront, owner Ed De Soto greeted me with a hearty smile and tasting cups of garlic oil and aged balsamic vinegar. Inside, a long row of stainless steel tanks called fusti hold extra-virgin oils from Spain, Italy, Tunisia, California, Australia, France and Chile. Each one is tapped for serve-yourself samplings, along with several varieties of deeply flavored balsamics. When you sip the pomegranate and the strawberry vinegars (\$13.99), I can almost guarantee you'll end up purchasing them—they're that good.

Granted, it takes an educated palate to discern the differences among all the oils, but as with wine, there's no shame in just buying what you like regardless of its country of origin or pedigree. I left the store with a Noccellara (\$14.99), an Italian finishing oil to drizzle on fish and vegetables, and a bottle of the strawberry balsamic, which makes an outstanding vinaigrette. Next time I'm there I'm grabbing the lemon "blaze," a thick and syrupy balsamic glaze with a perfect sweet-acid balance. All three would make original holiday gifts and would support a unique, independently owned local business. Plus, the customer service is superb.

NapaStyle, Los Gatos

As charming at the Olive Bar is, that's how charming NapaStyle tries to be. This store is a paean to acclaimed wine country chef Michael Chiarello—founder of Tra Vigne Restaurant, prolific cookbook author and host of shows on both the Food Network and the Fine Living Channel. If you're a Fine Living Channel devotee, this store's for you. If you're not, well, beware, because this place is selling Fine Living with capitals F and L. Gleaming copper pots, cutesy ceramic cows and \$2,500 leather furniture offer more than just accoutrements for entertaining—they offer a whole lifestyle for people who want to live like they're on a permanent Napa vacation.

Food products are scattered throughout the store, and salt (\$8.50–\$36), above all, is king. You'll find "Sicilian white salt," "Peruvian pink salt," "Hawaiian red salt," "Jurassic salt" (does it have crushed up dinosaurs?) and multiple varieties of Chiarello's signature "gray salt." In fact, Roxy Gribben, VP of marketing for NapaStyle, told me: "I've heard Michael say that salt is the new olive oil. He guarantees that your food will be 10 percent better if you change your salt." I can't fuss with his logic—salt is extremely important in cooking—but "citrus rosemary gray salt?" Really?

To be fair, I must admit that my pretty little canister of "truffle salt" (\$36) has done wonders

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for my scrambled eggs. One of these salts would indeed make a thoughtful gift for the ultraserious foodie. More than one might be pushing it.

Other products include the glossy "Meyer lemon marmalade" (\$12), a pleasantly sweet-tart spread threaded with chunks of citrus peel. And I certainly wouldn't kick the smooth "Cabernet dark chocolate sauce" (\$12) out of bed on a cold night. But the nuts in my little burlap sack of "garlic pistachios" (\$9.99) were so stale when I opened them I had to throw them away.

If you know someone who appreciates pretty packaging and dreams of a carefree yet perfectly composed life, look no further for your holiday shopping needs. The wine country lifestyle is closer than you think.

WineStyles, San Jose

From NapaStyle to WineStyles, it's pretty clear what the marketing buzzword is these days. This little Willow Glen wine shop is one of 183 independently owned WineStyles nationwide, and I can understand why this concept has proliferated. Wine buying can be a stressful, humbling experience for those who can't tell their pinot noir from their pinot gris, and WineStyles levels the playing field by turning the varietal-driven wine buying experience on its head.

Wines here are characterized as "crisp," "silky," "rich," "bubbly," "fruity," "mellow," "bold," and "nectar" and organized according to these descriptors. Microcaves set into the walls showcase the bottles, many of which cost under \$25. Store manager Brian Greer says he does a brisk business in higher-end, hard-to-find bottles as well.

I attended a Thursday evening wine tasting with a group of friends, shelling out \$15 for four substantial pours of pinot noir: two from California and two from New Zealand. Our wine guide/server/salesman spent a good bit of time answering our questions while we gabbed and nibbled cheese; next to us, a group of women were holding their book club meeting as they sipped. (At one point the salesman sat with them to discuss the book.)

When I was ready to buy a bottle, he asked me a number of very specific questions about what I liked in a wine, and in the end recommended a 2005 Greco di Tufo dei Deudi di San Gregorio (\$25.99). The little card said it had flavors of apricot, apple, fern and mint. WineStyles classifies it as "silky."

Was it silky? Who knows? But I enjoyed the wine, and the WineStyles experience, so they can call it whatever they like.

The Olive Bar

Address: 232 E. Campbell Ave., Campbell

Phone: 408.370.1901

Hours: 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun

Products: Extra-virgin olive oils, aged balsamic vinegars, olives and custom gift baskets

NapaStyle

Address: 32 N. Santa Cruz Ave., Los Gatos

Phone: 408.354.1119

Hours: 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun

Products: Salts, cured meats, condiments, spreads, cookbooks and serving ware

WineStyles

Address: 1140 Lincoln Ave., Suite 7, San Jose

Phone: 408.295.4500

Hours: 11am-7pm Tue-Wed, 11am-9pm Thu-Sat, noon-5pm Sun (\$15 tastings Thu-Sat only)

Products: Wine, custom gift baskets

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