

Globe Life

Tastings for the whole family

Bring your sippy cup to the vineyard

For some wineries, luring in families with helium balloons and petting zoos has become a business necessity

Carla Wintersgill

Sunday, Jun. 28, 2009 05:27PM EDT

When Sydney Loney gave birth to her son two years ago, she thought that her days visiting wineries were over.

A wine enthusiast, she grew up in the Niagara region of Ontario where regular weekend visits to vineyards for lunches and tastings are the norm. Ms. Loney even had a summer gig serving at one during university. Although she saw a lot of grapes, she didn't see many children. And when it came to bringing along her own kid, she was apprehensive.

"I felt sort of embarrassed about taking my son," Ms. Loney remembers. "I just hoped that they didn't mind."

To her surprise, not only were they happy to see her, they were rolling out the welcome mat for parents like her. After doing a little digging, she discovered that they weren't the only ones.

Wineries in Canada are increasingly courting the stroller set, with everything from helium balloons to apple juice served in wine glasses for the kids. Restaurants are now equipped with highchairs and the washrooms feature change tables. While some are doing it just as a courtesy for their customers, others are finding that it makes good business sense as well.

At Rollingdale Winery in Kelowna, B.C., owner Steve Dale wants visitors to feel at ease bringing their families.

A father of two elementary school-aged children, Mr. Dale has a picnic area complete with toys, playhouse and tot-sized tables. He also provides sparkling juice for the under-aged.

"That way parents don't feel like they're in a rush because there's nothing for the kids," said Mr. Dale. "If the kids are more comfortable, the parents are more comfortable. And more likely to stay a little longer."

Livia Sipos, who owns the Crown Bench Estates Winery in the Niagara region with her husband, agrees that catering to kids is an essential part of her business.

For the past eight years, Ms. Sipos has been offering helium balloons and candy to the children who come to her vineyard. Making sure that the young ones are occupied means the parents have more time to talk to her husband about the wine.

"They are more relaxed and whether or not they're going to buy wine depends on if they're relaxed or not," she says.

Christopher Waters, editor of *Vines*, a Canadian wine consumer magazine, thinks that making wineries family friendly embraces a more European-style model of wine culture.

In France, he notes, it's not unusual to see the vintner's children running around underfoot. Wine is just a part of family life, not “the experience of going to this hushed cathedral of Cabernet to taste.” By having kids in and around wineries, it would get rid of the snob appeal of wine.

“It can only help the wine industry if we make it more accessible,” Mr. Waters says.

Of course, making vineyards accessible to families also adds to the bottom line.

“If you're running a winery, the game is to have people stay longer on your property because they are going to be your best brand ambassadors,” he says.

At Puddicombe Estate Farms and Winery in Niagara, kids have the option of visiting the petting zoo, riding a train that runs through the property or going on a scavenger hunt. They also offer juice tastings at the bar.

“In a lot of ways it's a great marketing ploy,” admits Holly Gonsalves, a spokesperson for Puddicombe.

A lot of times parents will stop in so their children can ride the train and then decide to do a tasting as well, says Ms. Gonsalves.

“They had no intention of buying wine when they left home, but they almost always end up buying a bottle of wine,” she says.

Mr. Waters credits wineries in California for popularizing the trend of catering to families. The Napa Valley is known for accommodating children, and one of its more popular destinations is the Napa Valley Wine Train, which features a separate children's car complete with babysitters, games and movies.

“This is how the wine industry here has grown. We've adopted and adapted the best practices of other places,” he says.

For Ms. Loney, whose son is now 21/2 and who has a nine-month-old daughter as well, visiting wineries means that she is able to work the children into the lifestyle that she's always enjoyed.

She and a partner run JustTheFactsBaby.com, an online resource for new mothers which includes maps of baby-friendly locations in the Greater Toronto Area. After researching wineries, she decided to create a guide of the Niagara region. Ms. Loney estimates that 70 per cent of the wineries she spoke with were welcoming of children.

“There were still a couple that said that they dread when they see kids coming out of the car,” she says. “We just didn't put them on a map.”

Ms. Loney says that the positive response she got to her guide was huge. Parents were happy to be shown a way into somewhere they had previously thought was off-limits.

Still, not everyone was pleased that she was advocating for children to visit wineries. Ms. Loney did get one frustrated e-mail from a man who said that he liked to enjoy wineries without kids in them.

Tawse Winery in the Niagara region doesn't offer anything special for children. According to winemaker Paul Pender, it's more of an oversight than a deliberate decision to exclude families. Still, the idea of bringing kids to wineries reminds him of when his parents brought him furniture shopping as a child and “you just wanted to

stab your eyes out.”

Mr. Pender sees more and more people visiting with their children but says, “I don't know if they enjoy it or not.”

Ms. Loney thinks that wineries can be fun for kids and is happy that the two can co-exist.

“You want to go on a family outing that everyone can enjoy,” she says. “I think that wineries are responding to that.”

© Copyright 2009 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.