

What's on your grapePad?

A wine list that catches up to the 21st century

By DALE ROBERTSON Copyright 2011 Houston Chronicle

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Introduced recently by III Forks Restaurant in the Pavilions downtown, it's the first true 21st-century wine list. If ever there was an inevitable next step to help high-end restaurants sell their wines and manage their sizeable cellars, it's this gizmo, which bears a striking resemblance to the iPad.

Well, actually, it is an iPad, but the software has been modified to turn the tablet into a computerized wine list that, when fully formatted, will do almost everything but taste the wine and tip the sommelier for you.

"I love it and absolutely endorse it, and so do most of my customers who have had a chance to use it," says Brian Kelley, who oversees the Houston III Forks wine program. "I begged to get one here."

III Forks, a small chain of snazzy prime-beef emporiums, chose its Houston and Jacksonville, Fla., locations to be test stores for the grapePad, which is the brainchild of former Dell engineer Gary Abbott and some restaurant friends in Austin.

Abbott took early retirement from Dell about 10 years ago, and, while traveling hither and yon, acquired a taste for fine wine — as well as a thirst, pardon the pun, for knowledge. As he fumbled through heavy, hard-to-read lists, his computer geek side told him there had to be a better way to select the right bottle to accompany dinner. With the iPad's release, he saw the wine list's future.

The program, Abbott said, "works with any computer that can get to the Web - it doesn't have to be an iPad."

You can go to IIforks.houston.see.wines.com right now and see how it works.

Scroll through III Fork's 350 or so wines and pick one you're interested in. Tap on the name, and up comes the particulars. Eventually, complete data sheets, tasting notes and ratings will be available for every wine on the list. A diner can specify a particular kind of wine or even all the wines from a certain country, region or vintage. If the selection proves a memorable one, you can then log it via e-mail for future reference.

"No more trying to scrape labels off bottles or having to take the empty bottle home," Kelley said.

And no more excitedly picking something from a leather-bound telephone book disguised as a wine list, only to have the server return empty-handed 10 minutes later to report that it's sold out. The grapePad keeps track of the cellar inventory in real time, even telling the sommelier how much money per vendor he has tied up in inventory.

The data is kept current by grapePad's tech support, a godsend for restaurateurs, although Kelley admits he still does an "eyeball" survey of his stash every couple weeks to confirm the device's information.

Alas, for the moment, the limits of tablet technology make the device impractical for restaurants with lists of more than 1,000 wines, and the price for iPads remain high because other manufacturers have been slow to compete.

"That's been disappointing," Abbott said. He thinks tablets will have to drop to \$300 or less before we'll see grapePads in widespread use, or on every table at places like III Forks, which now has four.

But that was enough to get Kelley through the chaos of New Year's Eve, surely the ultimate test.