

Personalized wine solves gift dilemma for the hard-to-please

By Geri Koeppel

Wine bottle labels can be formal or funny, stuffy or simple. But they can also be personal: Imagine putting your own photo on a case or two of wine and coming up with a name such as "Bill's 29th Birthday Cabernet."

At Studio Vino in south Tempe, customers do exactly that.

They make their own wine and design custom labels for all kinds of

reasons, including weddings, birthdays, anniversaries and client gifts.

Even better, the process starts with a wine tasting – so clients can choose which of about a dozen varietals they want to make – and later includes a "bottling party," where friends, relatives or coworkers can get together and cork the final product.

Kari Zemper opened Studio Vino after visiting a similar business in Scottsdale and making wine to give as Christmas presents.

"It was just a fabulous gift," she said. "Highly personal and cost effective."

Soon Zemper started to think about starting her own business and gradually leaving corporate sales. But it had to be something she loved.

"When I wake up on Monday morning," she said, "what's not going to feel like work to me?"

When she heard the wine business was closing, she told husband Jeff, "This is a sign."

Though Zemper had never studied winemaking, held a liquor license or even bartended before, she navigated the bureaucracy. She set up the required Series 13 license, which allows her to make wine on site, give samples and sell wines to consume on the premises or take out.

Studio Vino opened in February 2008 in the Pueblo Anozira plaza on the southeastern corner of McClintock Drive and Guadalupe Road. The

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space resembles an art gallery, with high ceilings, walls adorned with Jeff Zemper's wine-related fine-art photography and glass cases housing wine bottles. A rectangular tasting bar in the center of the room seats 12 and holds racks of bottles underneath.

Clients can bring food to the tasting, where they decide which wines they'd like to bottle. Pinot Noir and Pinot Grigio are the most popular, followed by Sangiovese and Shiraz, according to Zemper. The grapes come from Lodi, Calif., where they're pressed, and Zemper adds oak chips or blocks (to the clients' taste) and yeast to start fermentation.

She continues the winemaking process, racking, clarifying and filtering the wine for 90 days. Almost all of her customers opt to return for the bottling, and they can bring food to then, too. They can design their own labels, or give Zemper artwork or photos and she will do it.

Julie Morrison, firm administrator for Morrison & Associates CPAs in Chandler, booked Studio Vino for a team building activity for 15 employees last year.

"It was very relaxed, it was fun, we learned a little something," Morrison said. "We got some great photos out of

it; we got a lot of laughs.

Kari was a great hostess. She was very hospitable, very warm."

They kept two bottles each and gave the rest as client gifts during the holidays. The label shows the staff dressed in Santa and reindeer hats.

"It was different," Morrison said. "It wasn't like sending your typical cookie tin."

Studio Vino also sells its wine to consume in-house or to take home, and can be reserved solely for wine-tasting parties. "Even sophisticated wine drinkers have found at least one thing they like," she said. But, Zemper adds, "it's not just about the wine."

"It's about having your friends here making the wine, experiencing the bottling, creating your own personalized label and having your own bottling party."

Studio Vino

Where: 1825 E. Guadalupe Road, Tempe. Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Wednesday, noon-9 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and by appointment.

Cost: \$349 for 28 bottles; \$210 for 14 bottles; \$369 for 56 half bottles.

Wine tasting only: \$10 per person.

Information: 480-897-1800; www.studiovino.com.