

HIGH-END HOUSE WINE

Customize a private reserve to fit your lifestyle—without owning a vineyard.

By Elizabeth Sile

To select the wine for Daniel Boulud's private-label program, wine director Daniel Johnnes solicits samples of Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs, Champagnes, and Bordeaux Blancs from France, California, and beyond. The wines are scrutinized and subjected to as many as three blind tastings before they're presented to Boulud.

What eventually makes it into the bottle becomes a Cuvée Daniel, something of an elevated house wine, to be served at restaurants across Boulud's empire. For Boulud and other top chefs, a private label can easily be made when one has a network with insider know-how. But could the discerning wine enthusiast work with a vineyard in this way to produce his own label to drink at home?

"Not possible," Johnnes says. Cult wineries like Screaming Eagle, in Napa Valley, agree: "We are not in the business of crafting wine for individuals," says direct-to-consumer manager Patrick J. Chapman.

This dilemma is solved at winemaker Bill Harlan's **the Napa Valley Reserve** (1000 Silverado Trail N.; 707-968-3190; thenapavalleyreserve.com), which many may know as the world's most exclusive wine club. For a \$175,000 initiation deposit, members can buy up to 75 cases (900 bottles at \$105 per bottle) a year of the Reserve's wines, made on the property's 80 acres. But unlike most other wine clubs, this one offers members the ability to



make their own blends with the Reserve's grapes. There's a half-barrel minimum (150 bottles for \$15,750) and a three-barrel maximum (or 900 bottles for \$94,500). The Reserve specializes in Cabernet Sauvignon blended with Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot and also makes a Sauvignon Blanc.

Another option is a custom-crush winery, which provides space for smaller wineries to process their grapes without investing in equipment. Sharath Chandra, director of

marketing and business development for **the Wine Foundry**

(45 Enterprise Court; 877-946-3404; thewinefoundry.com), describes his Napa-based custom-crush facility as "an incubator for wine brands." The cost to make, label, and bottle a barrel typically ranges from \$5,500 for a Sauvignon Blanc or a Chardonnay to \$13,000 for a top Cabernet Sauvignon.

The Wine Foundry deals exclusively with California vineyards in Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, and Santa Barbara. While hobbyists could source their own grapes, "some of these vineyards won't even talk to people about buying grapes," Chandra says. "The way we get the fruit is because we have the connections and we work them for years."

Personalized blending outside the United States is a challenge—customs and fluctuating exchange rates are a pain—but there are possibilities. For \$38,000, a new experience at Baglioni Hotels' **Cala del Porto** (rooms, from \$290; *Via del Pozzo, Punta Ala; 39-564/922-455; baglionihotels.com*), in Tuscany, lets guests blend a barrel of Sangiovese, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Syrah at the region's Rocca di Frassinello winery. Each individual's wine is aged for at least a year in a French oak barrel among the 2,500 others in the winery's barrel room.

You'll need somewhere to put your barrel's 300 bottles, so if you don't have a home cellar, consider a wine-storage company to protect your liquid investment, says Marc Lazar, president of **Domaine Wine Storage** (domainewinestorage.com), which has five outposts around the United States: "You want a place where you can trust the wine for a long period of time." ♦

ACCESS

To stock your own wine on a chartered yacht, you'll need to send it to the port ahead. Navigating taxes and customs is best left to a pro, like Cellar Advisors (cellaradvisors.com), which can arrange the "smuggling" for you.