

Montreal uncorks its big booze show

A key aim of La Grande Dégustation is to promote knowledgeable drinking

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Wine and beer sales in Quebec are flat or in decline, and spirits are still the least popular alcoholic choice of consumers here compared with the rest of Canada, but none of that fazes organizers of this fall's big booze show.

"It's always a good time to be in the business," said Jessica Harnois, the Société des alcools du Québec's spokesperson for La Grande Dégustation de Montréal, which starts Friday.

"The market may be changing, but people will always be drinking. If things go bad, you drink. If things go well, you drink to celebrate," said Harnois, 34, a well-known sommelier and wine personality. The two-day event, now in its third year, opens Friday at noon at Place Bonaventure and is expected to draw about 12,000 visitors. Over 200 producers from 20 countries are participating.

There will be 1,200 products to sample, with the spotlight this year on California wines, chardonnays from around the globe, and vodka. Half the products are available at SAQ stores and the other half by private import; the latter, you can order right at the event.

Thursday, Harnois and 10 other jury members tasted 62 chardonnays competing to be selected as the top 10 in the world. Then the hall was opened for a professionals-only afternoon, allowing hoteliers and restaurateurs to meet exhibitors and producers in private.

La Grande Dégustation was inaugurated in 2011 to build momentum for Christmas sales and bring consumers into direct contact with vintners and other producers. It replaced the Salon des vins et spiritueux de Montréal, held since 1994 every two years in March at the Palais des congrès as a showcase for local agents.

Relocated to Place Bonaventure, this year's event comes at a difficult time in the industry, with sales stagnant or waning.

The SAQ sold less wine last Christmas (over a quarter of a million fewer bottles), Easter (400,000 fewer) and all of last spring (half a million fewer) in its stores and in supermarkets and dépanneurs than the previous periods. Quebec sales of domestic and foreign beer also haven't been good; they fell by four per cent in 2012, more than anywhere else in the country.

And Quebecers still drink the least amount of spirits per capita, only 15 per cent of SAQ sales.

Though the monopoly finished 2012-13 in the black - \$1.3 billion in profits, three per cent more than in 2011-12, on \$2.9 billion in sales - this fiscal year it's gone back in the red: Profits dropped just more than four per cent in the first quarter on overall flat sales. At summer's end, the SAQ vowed to hold "some most stimulating" promotions to boost business.

La Grande Dégustation is one. The SAQ is the major sponsor, with the Quebec Association of Wine, Beer and Spirits Agencies. It's part of the SAQ's Joyeux Novembre! marketing push, which includes nine major events that began a week ago with the annual Montréal Passion Vin tasting of prestige wines, a fundraiser for a Montreal hospital.

Harnois was hired as spokesperson for them all, La Grande Dégustation included.

"Bottom line: It's the way to a lot of discoveries, especially expensive wines you may not be able to taste somewhere else," said Harnois, who was head sommelier and wine buyer for the SAQ's high-end Signature stores from 2007 to 2010 before going into business as a wine agent, columnist, blogger and host.

"And with the private imports, you can order right here (at the event) and get it shipped to an SAQ close to you. So you can get your order before Christmas, which is fun," said Harnois, president of the Canadian Association of Professional Sommeliers and vice-president of the Pan-American Sommelier Alliance.

"The market always evolves, and definitely, Quebecers like to drink well," said Harnois, who last May founded Vins au féminin, a promotions agency specializing in women sommeliers, and Saturday night at La Grande Dégustation will present her new wine guide, Un Sommelier à voter table, with co-author Alexandre Marchand.

"People go to the wine shows because they really want to know more," she said. "And the more they know, the more they want to know."

And, the SAQ hopes, drink.

La Grande Dégustation de Montréal is open to the public, ages 18 and older, Friday and Saturday from noon to 9 p.m. Admission is \$15 at the door or \$12 in advance at SAQ outlets, and includes a tasting glass and guide booklet. Tastings are paid by coupon; prices vary. For more, go to www.lagrandedegustation.com/en