

Gourmet Gizmo



Computer kiosk helps shoppers pick the right wine

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It can offer a wine at the Davis Food Co-op that goes with roasted turkey, tell you whether hamburger or halibut pairs best with cabernet sauvignon, quote the discount price of a Chilean varietal or tell you all about the vineyard that produced a bottle of Argentinian rosé.

Soon it will propose your dinner menu -- and then give you shopping list of the items you'll need to make it.

An all-knowing wine steward? Try the ReadyTouch wine kiosk. And if you believe the Menlo Park-based company that makes it and retail experts who watch this sort of thing, the computerized touch-screen station is part of the next generation of gadgets that will change the way you shop.

For years, merchants have fiddled with things like in-store TV advertising, computerized stations that look up inventory and self-checkout lines. Some devices fizzle, often because they focus on the retailer's cost, say experts, but don't make shopping more enjoyable. Sometimes a glitch can even damage a store's reputation.

But tradition-rich wine seems tailor-made for high-tech help. With thousands of labels on the market and more entering all the time, "it's impossible to keep up with everything," said Davis co-op customer David Jennings, a 68-year-old self-described wine expert.



The ReadyTouch kiosk stands about 4 feet high and resembles a small video slot machine without the handle. Shoppers at no cost can browse its database through menus displayed on a touch screen that channel the information by categories like wine and food pairings or varietals.

Flashing a wine bottle's bar code through the machine's built-in scanner unlocks a wealth of data that ReadyTouch continually uploads to the kiosk: price, specifics about the vintner and the grape's growing region, the wine's history, its flavor and food pairings and more.

Scan the label of an \$18.99 bottle of Graziano Zin Mundo and ReadyTouch suggests: "Enjoy with garlic and rosemary-seasoned lamb chops. ... A grilled burger with melted Gorgonzola in one hand and this Zin in the other is what the good life is all about."

Jennings scanned the bar codes on two French imports. ReadyTouch had plenty about the first: sale price, a picture of the label, three wine magazine reviews, optimum serving temperature, food pairings and technical information about its grape mix.

The second bar code scan triggered a white screen with black letters: "That wine is not in our database. We will get it loaded as soon as we can."

ReadyTouch President Peter Bostwick said the company has data on 4,000 wines and is adding more all the time, but some labels aren't cataloged because the vintners and wine sales representatives haven't provided information. ReadyTouch gets prices and some tasting notes from its retailer clients.

As anyone who has struggled through a computerized self-checkout line can attest, high-tech and retail sometimes go together like feather pillows and bowling balls.

Retailers like the notion of devices that save on employee labor costs, but such moves can run afoul of technical problems, customers who don't want to service themselves or shoppers who demand a personal touch with their purchase.

"Some people don't want anything to do with this stuff," said retail technology expert Laura Davis-Taylor. "That's why we advise that retailers use these things to enhance the store experience, not just cut costs."

Technology can betray a retailer, too. Home electronics giant Best Buy recently ran into trouble after news reports revealed that some customers were shown a Web site displaying higher in-store prices while incorrectly being told that they were viewing Web prices.

The Connecticut attorney general is investigating fraud accusations against the chain. Company officials blamed the problem on "human error" and "employee confusion."

Retail kiosks have been around for years, but only recently have the former "Web sites on a stick," gained general acceptance, said Davis-Taylor, whose company, Retail Media Consulting Inc., is based in Atlanta.

"Those early kiosks weren't built to give easy, accessible information to a busy shopper," said Davis-Taylor. "And, like many high-tech products for retailers, they were a cure searching for a disease."

But as home electronics have gone digital, consumers skilled in the ways of iPodding and the Internet are embracing the same technology to help them shop.

"There is definitely a growing comfort with these machines that wasn't there even 10 years ago," said Craig Parsons, spokesman for TNR Entertainment Corp., a Houston-based firm that operates computerized stations that rent DVDs.

The number of interactive kiosks in North America since 2005 will double to about 800,000 by the end of this year, according to industry tracker Summit Research Associates Inc. of Rockville, Md. The firm predicts the segment will reach 1 million units in 2008.

ReadyTouch hopes to exploit the trend. The firm started three years ago in a Menlo Park garage, spinning off from another company that makes market tracking software. It has wine kiosks in three Northern California stores so far, and agreements pending "on quite a few more," Bostwick said.

Since introducing ReadyTouch in November, the Davis co-op's wine sales have grown between 5 percent and 6 percent over the same period a year earlier. Without the kiosk, wine sales annually grew between 3 percent and 4 percent, said co-op spokesman Seth Larsen.

The system can handle more than wine. A store could load any number of items into a gigantic cross-referenced database that customers could browse for meal suggestions and then print out an itemized shopping list.

"We are looking forward to using the kiosk as a centralized source of information for wine as well as cheese, meats and our wine tastings," Larsen said.

Stores pay between \$10 and \$15 per day for a ReadyTouch machine. The fee covers all maintenance, up-to-the-minute programming and data collected by the unit.

Experts say that more high-tech shopping gizmos are coming: Store-issued PDAs that communicate via radio waves with signs that change according to your interests and tastes. Baskets that tally your purchases and wirelessly tap your charge card to speed checkout. Video screens mounted on shopping carts that access live online shopping assistants, store maps and more.

"All of these new tools can be fabulous," said retail consultant Davis-Taylor, "but what matters is whether they do anything for the shopper. Does it make shopping easier? More fun? Less intimidating?"

Despite finding nothing about one of his wine purchases in the ReadyTouch database, co-op wine customer Jennings deemed the machine "helpful" and said that he would use it again.

"I think I know a thing or two about wine," Jennings said. "I've crushed grapes in Tuscany. But I've never seen anything like this. It's neat."



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