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Wine country on wheels

Niagara company has tours with great taste

By **ROBIN ROBINSON**, SUN MEDIA

NIAGARA FALLS, Ont. -- Chris Fuccillo's passion for food and wine started early. After graduating from Mohawk College, he worked his way up from busboy positions in restaurants to sales and wine pairing positions with Fairmont Hotels in Whistler, B.C., and Bermuda.

So when the 35-year-old moved home to the Niagara Region, getting involved in the wine and tourism industry was a natural choice.

After working as a manager for two of Niagara's top wineries -- Chateau des Charmes and Pillitteri Estates Winery, Fuccillo was ready for a change and started Niagara Vintage Wine Tours.

WINE COUNTRY

Now, Fuccillo runs four different tours to some of Niagara's top wineries -- Coyote's Run Estate Winery, Hillebrand, Konzelmann Estate Winery, Peller Estates, Pillitteri and Reif Estate Winery. And he partners with local restaurants and lodgings to create a "true wine country experience."

Predictably, Fuccillo is enthusiastic about wine education and while he does provide door to door service from area hotels, B&Bs and country inns, his tours are more than a taxi service.

Fuccillo says he thinks of his touring van as a "classroom on wheels."

"Learning about wine is not just about going to wineries ... food and wine are wrapped up together. It's about culture, about history, about making friends ... it's really about the people," Fuccillo says.

Some of the people you might meet on Fuccillo's Winemaker's Dinner Tour are the Mollica family -- mother Luciana and sons Domenic and Claudio -- who run Casa Mia Ristorante.

After evening tastings at three wineries -- including a behind the scenes glimpse into Pillitteri's winemaking processes and underground wine cellar -- the tour winds up at Casa Mia for a relaxed four-course wine-pairing dinner.

The family run dining room at 3518 Portage Rd. is something of an institution in Niagara Falls -- a favourite with locals and a two-time winner of the region's Misty award for Best Fine Dining Restaurant.

Luciana's roots run deep in the city's food service industry. Before opening Casa Mia 25 years ago, she was an executive chef at another Niagara Falls institution -- the revolving restaurant of the Skylon Tower. Today Claudio shares the chef duties, while Domenic acts as host.

Specialties of the house include gnocchi gorgonzolla, zuppa de pesci (a savoury fish stew) and provimi veal rib chop with truffles.

The welcoming eatery has a chef's table and an atmospheric wine cellar, which is available for small group dinners.

"I have been friends with the Mollicas since high school and I know that everything here is done with a lot of heart," Fuccillo says.

The Winemaker's Dinner Tour is \$149 per person plus gratuities and includes a different VQA wine paired with each course.

If you only have a few hours, Fuccillo's narrated Reserve Tour takes in three award winning wineries. Participants get a glimpse of the winemaking process, taste reds, whites and Icewines at each stop and nosh

on a delicious cheese tray from Cheese Secrets in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The King St. cheese boutique sells almost 100 cheeses from Canada and around the world including hard to find selections such as Roaring '40s, a blue cheese from Tasmania. This year, they are offering "valet cheese parking" for customers who want to park their purchases while taking in a performance at the Shaw Festival.

The three-hour Reserve Tour is \$69 per person.

For more information on Niagara Vintage Wine Tours, contact 905-933-7433 or see niagaravintagewinetours.com. The website has an online "wine educator" service, which allows you to submit questions on topics such as food and wine pairing, storing and decanting wine, etc.

For details on Casa Mia Ristorante, contact 905-356-5410 or casamiaristorante.com.

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