

Competing For Space

How one Paso Robles wine brand wowed an on-premise veteran

Morton's The Steakhouse boasts 80 worldwide locations and a 30-year history, based on a reputation for superb hospitality and aged USDA prime steak. In Woodland Hills, an upscale suburb in northwest Los Angeles County, Arnie Morton's Steakhouse is one of the newer venues of the Morton's family of restaurants.

Sitting in the lounge at Bar 12-21, customers are sipping custom cocktails and glasses of wine. Someone watches me take photos and asks what magazine or newspaper it's for. When I respond, the business-suited man replies, "We've done something right to earn an Arnie Morton's here."

He adds, "You can quote me." Paul Chrisman, Arnie Morton's General Manager is the subject before me, dressed in a tailored tux and eyes askance while we're talking. Not that he's being rude; a good GM has to have eyes darting around the room to keep up with the goings-on.

Chrisman, 45, joined the Morton's family in 2001 at the Vegas steakhouse. Inspired by his mother—who worked most of her adult life in resort restaurants along the Delaware River—Chrisman took a similar path, serving tables and managing restaurants in Houston, Aspen and Carmel until he landed in Las Vegas.

From server to captain to assistant manager, Chrisman gained experience and wine wisdom, and would soon run Arnie Morton's in Burbank, before opening the Woodland Hills restaurant last September. His style of management is akin to what his mentors—Tim Cottrell in Aspen and Kirk

Probasco of Monterey's Stokes restaurant—taught him: Have faith in your employees. "Tim and Kirk let me run things my way and they got more from me as a result," Chrisman notes to THE TASTING PANEL.



Kiamie Kuvée 2005 made the cut for one of the most hard-to-get placements. With fruit sourced from top growers in Paso Robles, the blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Zinfandel offers up deeply concentrated aromas and flavors of cassis and blackberry with well-integrated tannins.



Paul Chrisman, GM of Arnie Morton's in Woodland Hills with Kiamie Kuvée. "This rich and concentrated red from Paso Robles is a perfect match for our USDA prime steaks."

"Our wine list is 70 percent corporate," attests Chrisman, who works closely with Assistant Manager Mike Vonnegut to carefully custom-pick their very own short selection of 40 labels.

"We sell so many more Cabs and blends than we do obscure whites," he shares. "Morton's is a brand name, and we do well selling known wine brands. But then there's the special hand-sell."

Chrisman and Vonnegut knew that there was something special about Kiamie, a small-production label from Paso Robles. "We liked the local edge: Paso Robles versus Napa or Sonoma. We liked to value of this Cab blend, and we absolutely were sold on its profile." ■■