

Sommelier Don Sritong expands into the dining scene with Coppervine.



INSIGHT

Wine website: "I really like Cellar Tracker. It's the largest database of private wine collectors, who post notes on what they think about wine."

Favorite Thai: "I love Anna's Asian Bistro & Sushi Bar. It's super-authentic. When you say Thai spicy, it's Thai spicy."

Sritong is banking that Chicagoans will embrace Coppervine, his comfort-food destination in Lincoln Park that features suggested beer, wine, and cocktail pairings with every dish. "I want to bring food pairing to the masses," Sritong says. "I set out nine years ago with Just Grapes to make the wine-buying process simple, fun, and functional. I want to do the same with food and beverage pairings."

Although high-end local restaurants like Tru and Alinea already do such pairings, Sritong says it's hard to find at the \$50 price point for a meal and a couple of drinks. "I want this to be the neighborhood restaurant where people come three days a week," says Sritong, whose two-story restaurant will feature a test kitchen upstairs for customers to try out pairings under consideration for the main menu. "Had we done this concept 10 years ago, it would have fallen on deaf ears or we would have had to make it very high-end. With the explosion of food shows on TV, everyone is labeling themselves a foodie these days." To develop the pairings, Sritong has collaborated with former Zealous chef/owner Michael Taus, resulting in dishes like Maine lobster mac and cheese paired with a Qupé Y Block Chardonnay, Delirium Tremens ale, or a cocktail made with Milagro Silver tequila, Aperol, lemon, and honey.

The son of Thai immigrants, Sritong says he constantly craved hot dogs and hamburgers in an effort to assimilate. "My mom didn't know how to cook American food," Sritong says. "Her hamburger had Thai spices and chili paste. I look back and say, 'Shame on me,' since I was exposed to so many great foods at a young age." Years later, Sritong learned about food and wine pairings while waiting tables as a student at University of California, Davis. A chance encounter with a job recruiter from Kendall-Jackson changed everything. After moving through the ranks at Kendall-Jackson, Sritong sold wine to Zagat-rated restaurants for Kobrand Corporation. Then he rode the Australian wine wave with Constellation Brands before opening his wine boutique Just Grapes, which recently relocated from the West Loop to the Gold Coast.

"If it were up to me, I would have done it a year ago," Sritong says of opening Coppervine. "The economy has finally taken a turn. Chicagoans have really evolved their outlook on dining and are ready to take on the concept that wine, beer, and cocktails can be paired with food to elevate both." 1962 Halsted St.; coppervinechicago.com MA

Pair Master

BOUTIQUE WINE STORE OWNER DON SRITONG BRINGS HIS EXPERTISE TO THE RESTAURANT WORLD. BY DAWN REISS

Like many wine connoisseurs, Don Sritong is also a passionate foodie. "I've always felt strongly that wine should never stand alone—it's always better with great food," says Sritong, who honed his skills as a sommelier at Kendall-Jackson, Kobrand Corporation, and Constellation Brands before opening the wine shop Just Grapes. "But it takes more than passion to jump over the line and make it a business."