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Area wine lovers mixed on 'Net sales ban There are still ways to have fine wine shipped in, fans say

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EAST MANATEE - Dellburt Kidwell would like the convenience of ordering a case of California wine on the Internet.

But he doesn't think underage drinkers should get that opportunity.

"My own preference would be to get wine on the computer, but sensibly speaking, I don't know how good an idea that would be," said Kidwell, who founded the 60-member Lakewood Ranch Wine Club two years ago.

"Protecting the most vulnerable - the underage drinkers - is the way to go in this case," Kidwell added.

The case in question is the upcoming U.S. Supreme Court fight between those who oppose Florida's law preventing Internet users from ordering wine across state lines and those who think the ban should be lifted.

Right now, Florida and 23 other states make direct-to-consumer Internet wine sales illegal.

Just as local wine lovers can't legally order wine over the Internet without it going through a Florida distributor first, East Manatee's Rosa Fiorelli Winery can't ship directly to out-of-state customers.

Antonio Fiorelli of Rosa Fiorelli Winery, the only licensed winery in Manatee County, wants the ban lifted.

"It's a free world," Fiorelli said. "It's good that California should ship here and we should be able to ship out of state, too. If I am going to fight on this issue, I am going to fight for my business."

Fiorelli recently signed a petition started by a winery owner in Clermont asking legislators to remove the ban.

"Some people say the distributor has his hands on the government here," Fiorelli said. "They are good lobbyists and want to keep everything for themselves."

Local wine drinkers, producers and retailers, along with youth leaders, all take difference stances.

Like many wine lovers, Kidwell said he would like to go online and access a selection of wine that's not available through Florida retailers. Many small California wineries, for example, do not ship to Florida, Kidwell said.

"There are a number of vineyards around the world that don't make wine in such quantities that they could ship to every state," Kidwell said.

A Floridian can visit California, buy wine and have it shipped home, Kidwell said.

"If you become a member of a wine club in California there are ways to ship it here," Kidwell said. "They can put you on a list. There is not a total blockade now."

Mondher Kobrosly, owner of Time Saver Food and Wine on Holmes Beach, wants the ban to stay in place.

"I have to pay overhead, licenses and here someone says, 'I can get this wine directly from the winery for three dollars less,' " Kobrosly said. "That makes it a little difficult for me."

Kobrosly shares concerns about minors getting their hands on wine if the ban is lifted.

"The authorities can't really check on it," Kobrosly said. "There is no proof of identification required to get a package. Wineries can send boxes without labels."

Although some retailers are quick to bring up the problem of minors ordering wine on the Internet, at least one local Christian youth leader has a problem with that reasoning.

"If a teenager wants to drink they are going to find alcohol somewhere, and I don't know if they will try to get a hold of someone's credit card to go for expensive, fine wine," said Michelle Skorski, youth director at The Front, a Christian youth club at Whitfield Plaza.

"True, kids are more Internet savvy," Skorski added. "But if the lifting of the ban does come to pass, I don't think kids buying wine will be a huge issue."

Heidi May of Manatee County's Old Mission Vineyard, which is not yet licensed to sell wine, agrees with Skorski.

"Wine is not exactly the drink of choice of teens unless it is Boone's Farm," May said. "When is the last time you heard a kid say, 'Hey, I've got a bottle of Chardonnay. Let's party.' "

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