LOCAL DISTILLERS, BREWERS & BARS

From left, Thomas and Joan Nichols toast to fellow members during one of their monthly meetings

The Vines that Bind

Grape Basin Wine Club members share 20 years of good times and wine.

WRITTEN BY **SUSAN WINTERS** • PHOTOS BY **CANDICE VIVIEN**

It started simply enough. In November 2001, Karen Bowman-Binks invited five couples over on a weekend night for wine and appetizers. The couples, whose children attended school together, shared a love of wine. A teacher at Sarah Winnemucca Elementary School in Reno, Bowman-Binks even prepared handouts describing the history and flavor notes of the Oregon wines, which were paired with the shrimp and fresh mozzarella appetizers. An early evening with light fare meant the parents of young children could get on with the rest of their weekend plans.

The group soon realized appetizers were not enough. Within two months, the gatherings evolved into monthly dinners with a set of club ground rules: 1) The host does everything from choosing the theme to shopping, cooking, and cleaning up; 2) At the end of the evening, the host provides the menu, wine research, flavor profile notes, labels, recipes, and photos to member Jeannie Nichols to archive in the club's journal; and 3) The dinner's theme remains a secret until the host welcomes the guests.

"Our friendships have strengthened over the years. It was a lifesaver during quarantine."

— Karen Bowman-Binks

THE BIG REVEAL

"The big reveal is when everyone walks in. That's what makes it fun," Nichols explains.

Sometimes life events inspire the theme. When a series of earthquakes shook Reno in April 2008, the Nicholses suffered damage to several rooms in their home. Once the family completed the sheetrock repairs, they hosted a Ground Zero Earthquake Celebration featuring Lodi vineyards' Earthquake Merlot and Zinfandel paired with Fallen Cheese Soufflé, squash, Shake and Bake Pork Chops, and Upside Down Cake.

Other times, the themes mirror their lives. Inspired by Bowman-Binks' husband Jim's career as a fireman, the couple planned an evening featuring Hook & Ladder's 2003 Third Alarm Cabernet Sauvignon and Fire Station Red Winery's 2003 Shiraz. Bowman-Binks prepared the crab-stuffed mushrooms and tortellini salad from John Sineno's *The New Firefighter's Cookbook*. When guests arrived, she met them at the door alone. Jim had been called to fight a fire in Chico.

TRAVELING THE WORLD FROM HOME

Bowman-Binks says the club has been all over the world with its wines. During Cuba night at the Binkses' home, club members danced to Cuban music and dined on fried plantains. In celebrating Nuit Blanche, the all-night festival in France, members wore white and sipped white wines.

Driving through Placerville, club members Glennis and Gary Bishop discovered retired plastic surgeon Steve Grace's winery, Lewis Grace featuring Patriot Grace wines, when they spotted a Nevada Wolf Pack flag flying above it. During the club's Celebration of Apple Hill Wines evening, Gary called the group into the living room. Dr. Grace made a guest video appearance to introduce his winery's 2012 Dry Riesling and 2010 Syrah.

In the club's early years, the original 12 club members became acquainted through their children as well as through The Junior League of Reno. Since the members had young children, they would break for holidays and family vacations, but members continued meeting at least nine times throughout the year. While the hosts' responsibility for an entire event may seem like a huge lift, when it's their turn as guests, they can savor excellent food, wine, and entertainment for the remainder of the rotation. Nichols believes the club's rotation format is one key to its staying power.

Over the years, the club lost several members to life circumstances until a core of seven remained, a more intimate group and a better fit around the table. Members shared laughs while they pondered the meanings of certain flavor profiles such as "pool noodles" and "built like a skyscraper." They researched *Epicurious* magazine and studied recipes from their own winery subscriptions. Nichols also credits Rebecca Davidson, wine supervisor at Total Wine & More in Reno, for her assistance with developing menu pairings, either based on the vintage or ingredients. Then COVID-19 struck.

"We pivoted, and we continued to meet monthly," Nichols says.

Without a break for holidays or vacations, the club continued, but members prepared meals in their separate homes and met via Zoom. Some 2020 themes were season inspired, such as November's Baby It's Cold Out Here, with a menu of soups and stews. Other themes reflected the times. For May's theme, Shelter in Place, members prepared meals using wine and ingredients from their own pantries. Each couple prepared its own charcuterie board reflecting individual styles for December's Quarantine Bored. In May 2021, the club convened in person for dinner on the patio at the Rattlesnake Club in Reno — the first time they had met in person since the pandemic started.

Clockwise from left: Thomas Nichols hosts the Great Basin Wine Club; The club meets for wine and meals monthly, with the host planning the theme and menu. This menu will be added to the journals below it; Karen Bowman-Binks hosted the first-ever wine pairing for the club members

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Since that first gathering in 2001, several members have retired, all of their children have become adults, and the club journal has expanded into five large binders. After two decades and about 180 to 200 dinners, the club shows no sign of slowing down. Member Glennis Bishop promises "more fun to come."

Writer Susan Winters likes her stories paired with a good Riesling.

RESOURCES

Ready to host your own wine-pairing event? The following resources might help.

Rebecca Davidson, wine supervisor
Total Wine & More
6671 S. Virginia St., Reno
775-853-3669 • Totalwine.com

***Epicurious* magazine**
Epicurious.com