

SELL



Fine wine: "We've been the fastest-growing Italian importer for the past two years," says Josh Hanson (r.), with Kay Syrrist.

[SNAPSHOT] Through the Grapevine

MARKETING DIRECTLY TO CONSUMERS DISTINGUISHES THIS WINE IMPORTER FROM INDUSTRY PEERS.

BY DAWN WEINBERGER **MOST WINE IMPORTERS** get their vino into the marketplace through what the industry calls the "three-tiered system"—the importer strikes a deal with a distributor, who then markets the product to retailers and restaurateurs. Not Seattle-based Small Vineyards LLC, an importer specializing in hand-harvested wine from family-owned vineyards in Italy. Co-founders Josh Hanson, 36, Doug Fugate, 49, and Kay Syrrist, 50, developed a concept virtually unheard-of

in the wine industry: a direct-to-consumer approach in which employees host in-store tastings, wine dinners and other events.

"No one is in a position to train the salespeople and develop the brand like the importer," says Hanson, whose unorthodox business model has paid off to the tune of \$5 million in 2005 sales—an 85 percent increase over the previous year. The 5-year-old business continues to mature, with year-end sales projected to increase by another 50 percent.