

Wine Shopping the Millennial Way

How millennials and the wine industry are helping each other



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When I bought my first 1972 Ridge wines, I could not believe what went through my mind. At Crane & Kelly, one of the most well-known wine and cheese shops in San Francisco in the 1970's and 1980's, I tasted six different Ridge wines and uncovered a new world of super-premium wines. So prodigious was that moment, as I read the beautifully written winespeak on the back of the label, I instantly became a victim of the wine bug. (

A common "malady" typifying other wine-crazed baby boomers.)

I began a search for wine that still continues to today. But is this normal? While there will always be those who will continue to taste every wine and search every vineyard, the wine world has developed an infrastructure that close to guarantees quality throughout all pricepoints in the marketplace, driving a new kind of wine consumerism.

MILLENNIALS AND WINE—IT'S MORE ABOUT DRINKING THAN THINKING

Beginning with the early 1970's, the arduous hunt for small lots of wines amongst the wine cognoscenti became relentless and more mainstream. Going to top wine merchants throughout metropolitan

SHORT COURSE

- ▶ The new Millennial wine consumers are much more focused on buying and enjoying wine now than searching out obscure, specific wines or thinking/talking a lot about them.
- ▶ Instead of spending so much time on "niche" themes, the wine industry is producing an infrastructure that doesn't change with each new fad, making experimenting easy for Millennials.
- ▶ New Zealand is a good example of a wine region that is delivering to new wine consumers, with high quality, reliability, and regional specialization in major varietal categories (sauvignon blanc and pinot noir), as well as easy-to-use and taint-free screwcap closures.
- ▶ The Green Revolution, from biodynamic and organic winemaking, to eco-friendly winery design and packaging, is helpful in marketing to Millennials.

America and discovering wines that no one had ever heard of became the rule and not the exception. That is no longer the case. While the search for the latest and greatest, not to mention the rarest, will never die, new wine lovers have decided that drinking fine wines is better than studying them; they feel there is more to life than just wine.

The new generation of consumers, the Millennials (born 1980 to 2000), have picked up where their parents have left off, but are embracing wines in a different way. While they are no longer the zealots of yesteryear, they are no less passionate than the early trendsetters. Millennials are fitting wines into their busy lives as just another part of their daily routine. They are, perhaps following a master plan in which wine is finally becom-

ing an integral part of mainstream America.

Millennial generation professional Rachel Reed (age 25), an account coordinator for Charles Communications, a top-quality wine and food public relations firm, comments, "As a member of the Millennial generation, I am surprised by my friends who haven't a clue about wines. My friends buy wines based on price and varietal often armed with only a rudimentary knowledge of their respective ratings." Yet as daily imbibers of wines, unlike baby boomers, gen-x and gen-y, they have little need to become experts on the subject. You won't find them dissecting back labels. For them, a good wine experience is just a twist of a screw cap away, or a pleasant evening at a local wine bar.

While unwinding at a hotel bar at the Riverside International Wine Competition with fellow wine judges and a couple shots of tequila, I met a couple in their 20's who described in detailed how they loved shopping at BevMo, a 68-store chain in California and Arizona. Telling me that they often spend an hour or two in the store looking at all of my company's shelf talkers and descriptions on wines, they seemed incredibly thrilled to meet the guy who creates most of those signs. They alluded to the ease of simply reading the ratings and verbiage before making their purchases. When I asked them did they enjoy the wines they bought? The answer was, "Yes."

How can it be that smart young couples can get their fix of good wines by merely reading shelf talkers in a store? Perhaps the industry is finally making it easier for consumers? Instead of spending so much time

on "niche" themes, the wine industry is producing an infrastructure that doesn't change with each new fad. From the four major varietals (chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and sauvignon blanc) and a fifth (malbec) to significant issues (organic farming and screwcaps), the industry is positioning itself to take care of the millennials who prefer the ease of buying the product and taking it home to drink rather than burying it in the cellar.

MILLENNIALS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN

The Wine Council states, "thirteen percent of the US population buys 85% of the wine." Jeff Prather of San Francisco's Ferry Market Plaza, one of world's great wine educators, counters by exclaiming, "Consumers really want to know." At his shop of hand-selected wines, consumers routinely ask for organically grown/biodynamic wines, hillside wines, and boutique California producers. While speaking

at the First International High Altitude Viticultural and Winemaking Symposium at Snows Lake Vineyard in Lake County, Prather stated, "We consider ourselves wine merchants, not wine retailers, in fact we will not hire people without restaurant experience."

While longtime purists are often horrified that the days of the classic wine merchant could be disappearing, it is clear that most new wine consumers prefer the ease of shopping without a guy with the tastevin (a classic metal tasting cup hung over the neck of a sommelier) or an wine encyclopedic embedded into the brain standing over their shoulders recommending the most obscure wines on the planet.

One of the industry's most profound professionals, Paul Wagner (a 30-year professional and President of Balzac Communications, and a fellow V&WM columnist) defines the Millennials as "fearless in the matching of food and wine. They are adventurous and un-intimidated and not so much

interested in ratings. They are more open in seeking out other regions of the world This generation is not into learning (infinite details) of wines, they just want to have fun (like Cyndi Lauper's song), and this is just what the wine industry has been waiting for."

NEW ZEALAND EXEMPLIFIES NEW WINE TRENDS

David Strada, US Marketing Manager of the New Zealand Winegrowers, states, "As recently as five years ago, New Zealand would not have necessarily have been considered amongst the world top regions for pinot noir due to brief viticultural and enology experience working with the proper locations and clones." What makes Strada's words so appropriate is that the New Zealanders are giving the Millennials exact what they want and in the right form.

New Zealand's pinot noir production grew from 1,425 tons in 1990 to 22,062 in 2006 and with its con-

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sistent quality, marketplace availability remains very good. Overall, New Zealand imports to the United States grew from 14,500 cases to 1,601,000 cases during the same period. At Beverages & more, New Zealand's wines have become so popular that the SKU count realized one of the greatest rates of growth of any category.

The New Zealand pinot noir story is intriguing because as the Holy Grail varietal, few top pinot regions in the world can provide consistent quality and quantity. Going back into time, Oregon represents a case study in fine rarified pinot noirs. When the Oregonians began their pinot noir surge with the 1983 vintage, it was clear that the Willamette Valley was making wines of ultra-premium quality, but it quickly became apparent that this would always be a niche market. With Oregon's erratic climate conditions (almost as bad as Burgundy's) few industry observers doubt the potential greatness of these wines but everyone realizes that one must choose carefully and rely on buying the right producer and vintage.

In the early 1970's, Dry Creek Vineyard released one of California's most Loire Valley-like sauvignon blanc. The 1972 bottling was grassy and lively and a dead ringer for a Sancerre. Just a few years later, the industry talked heavily about "food style" sauvignon blancs and how they were so much better than chardonnay. The trend never caught on because there were not enough wines made in this style and producers became gun shy about making their wines too grassy.

In the ensuing years, wineries transformed their sauvignon blancs into chardonnay wannabes with riper core fruit flavors. The wines ended up in the "neither fish nor fowl" category. With a long void for the perfect white "food wine," New Zealand sauvignon blanc came on the market beginning with the late 1980's and finally reached critical mass by 2004. What made the Kiwi sauvignon blancs so successful according to Strada was the fact that "They are so distinctive and offered great (consistent) quality."

When bad corks became such a problem in the late 1990's, the industry worked primarily on two

fronts: one, by improving the quality at the source (in Portugal) and two, using other closures; screwcaps took a lead role in solving the difficulty. Screwcaps are not entirely without controversy; some contend there could be a reduction problem of a slightly burnt, rubbery, cabbage-like character in the wine after two years in the bottle.

Jonathan O'Bergin, proprietor and winemaker of Gryphon Wines and the Marie Johnston brand in the Anderson Valley and San Luis Obispo, respectively, makes a mere 3,500 cases annually and will release his first screwcap wines in 2007. O'Bergin comments, he wants to guarantee his customers a sound bottle of wine every time. In vintage 2006, over 90% of New Zealand's wines were bottled under screwcap.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE GREEN REVOLUTION IN WINE MARKETING

Mendocino Farms, a relatively new biodynamic venture of top quality winemakers Steve Ryan and Owsley Brown and celebrated enologist Paolo Caciogiorna, is producing some of this county's most delicious ultra premium wines. When I attended the Return to Terroir/Biodynamic event in Los Angeles this past spring, I found the group of wines pouring at the event quite impressive.

Winery Director Stephanie Jarvis poured at a Clever Holmes (a green home architecture company) event in Palo Alto this past April and found an excited group of attendees. Could this kind of event be envisioned a

couple of decades ago? Green home furnishings and biodynamics?

This past January in my search for Argentine malbec, I visited Karim Mussi, Winemaker of Bodega Altopedro in Mendoza, Argentina. One of the most intense vignerons I have ever met, Mussi has been farming biodynamically since 2001. In response to many customers, including the Millennials, he is determined to lead not only his winery but also Argentina into a future where matters of pure terroir and proper land management are of the highest priority. In tasting the wines, I found superior flavors that embodied a future that should become mainstream within the next fifteen years.

As a youthful and thoughtful caretaker of the land, this already experienced and highly trained winemaker is just one of a part of the growing movement to improve the industry in all ways possible. This is a far cry from the days of poorly made organically grown and produced wines without the use of sulphur dioxide. The whites were always oxidized, and the reds seldom tasted good.

The wine world has grown up. While the most serious and dedicated enophiles will still follow the baby boomer mantra of "gotta find the best no matter how difficult to get my hands on," most Millennials simply want the good stuff without overthinking the process. Whether it is a virtual or real basket, they just want to head to the check out and pull the cork (or twist off the cap) once they are home, and simply enjoy it—what a concept!



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