

[REFRAMING CALIFORNIA]

IT'S TIME TO
RECONSIDER THE WAYS
TO SELL WINE FROM
THE GOLDEN STATE

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When talking about exciting wine regions, it's easy to forget California. The Golden State is responsible for about two-thirds of all wines sold in the U.S., yet sometimes we take it for granted.

But California is one of the world's most exciting wine regions. It's not just the perfect weather: it's the constant reinvention. Often we make that a weakness, reflexively favoring Nth-generation Europeans making wine just like their ancestors (though it's actually rarely true), as opposed to California, where they produce whatever's fashionable. The truth is, California's fine wine culture is now about 50 years old, and the learning curve over those 50 years has been steep. A state that once followed world wine fashion now sets it. Moreover, most clichés people believe about

California are simply not true. It makes some big-bodied high-alcohol wines, but it also makes world-class elegant Pinot Noir. It has some enormous brands, but it also is full of ambitious, small-scale entrepreneurs. Napa Valley alone has 500 wineries, all of them believing they make something special.

California wine sometimes sells itself: the marketing and label designs can be just that good. You can sell even more with just a little effort. Here are some strategies to keep in mind. >>



Is the sun setting on Napa Valley? That would be an exaggeration, but competition has ramped up, and savvy retailers and consumers are embracing other California regions, as well as wines beyond Cabernet and Chardonnay.



KNOW YOUR REGIONS (AND ALTERNATIVES)

Everybody knows Napa Valley Cabernet, and you probably carry some. But even entry-level wines have gotten expensive, and for most stores, there are only so many \$50+ Cabs you can stock. Alexander Valley in neighboring Sonoma County is a great alternative. The wines fit the Napa Valley taste profile—generously fruity—at a fraction of the cost. Jordan is a famous name from here; Scherrer is a cheaper alternative. An emerging area to know is Lake County, which borders Napa Valley. Obsidian Ridge is one of the best vineyards in Lake County and the wines can retail under \$25. Mention that geography on a shelf talker.

Russian River Valley has earned fame for Pinot Noir in the ripe style, but it will never appeal to your Burgundy customers,

The Sonoma Coast AVA is deceptively large, and stretches well inland.



VALUE CABERNET SAUVIGNON:

It's more difficult to make good cheap Cabernet than other varieties, but that doesn't mean there aren't some reliable names from up and down the state.

NORTH COAST

Geysler Peak
Benziger ▶



CENTRAL COAST

Hahn Estates
Hayman & Hill Reserve Selection



PASO ROBLES

J. Lohr Seven Oaks ▶
Robert Hall
Sextant
Viña Robles

who, given the prices of Burgundy these days, are looking for alternatives. Sonoma Coast wines are the most Burgundian Pinots from California, though it's important to taste them as the enormous appellation stretches far from the coast. Members of West Sonoma Coast Vintners are a good starting point; try Hirsch, Peay, Chamboulé or Red Car. Anderson Valley and Sta. Rita Hills are also good regions to look for Pinot Noirs that prize elegance instead of power.

The Central Coast is still the place for Quality/Price Ratio for just about every variety. If you're looking for good California reds under \$20, this is the place to be. And for power on a budget, it's hard to beat Paso Robles.

LEFT: Solar panels, seen here in Napa Valley, are just one of many ways the California wine industry has embraced "green" practices.

RIGHT: Napa Sauvignon Blanc has gained critical acclaim and is helping to chip away at Chardonnay's long reign as top varietal white wine.

DO YOU NEED THE FAMOUS BRANDS?

Some smaller retailers say they can't compete on price for big brands like Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay with the big-box stores, so they don't bother to stock them.

This may be a mistake. You might not move a lot of K-J or BV, but if you don't carry any of these brands at all, you might not get a second visit from a busy shopper who drops by looking for something familiar.

Retailers often tell me they want to talk with their customers and learn their preferences, and that's admirable. It's what I want in a retailer. But I like to talk. Many of today's younger wine customers do most of their communication on social media. You can't start a conversation until they're ready to have one. Maybe that bottle of K-J can be the starter: "How would you like to try a wine that's just as good from a smaller producer?"

WINE STYLES ARE CHANGING ALL THE TIME

So you think you know California Chardonnay? If you haven't tasted a lot of it recently, you might have missed the move away from buttery, slightly sweet versions toward more freshness. This is a trend all over the state. It's particularly



noticeable in Carneros, where Rombauer-style Chardonnays ruled as recently as five years ago. Full-bodied wines are still in, but now they have tangible acid.

Zinfandel, too, is changing; it's still ripe and fruity, but super-alcoholic versions aren't as popular. Check out Ridge (of course), Bedrock or Turley. Even Napa Cabernet, the state's tentpole, is noticeably

different than a decade ago: acidity is more popular, especially in the top wines.

RED BLENDS ARE KING

Millennial men especially like red blends because they're new and exciting; and because they are fruity, low in tannin, and often slightly sweet. With the exception of The Prisoner, however, Millennials don't want to spend a lot of money.

Don't be afraid to literally use the words "new and exciting!" on a shelf talker. Millennials think having lots of grape varieties in a wine is a feature, not a bug, and they like the auteur concept. (But they don't like tannins; smoother is safer.)

Fortunately there is no shortage of red blends seeping from California, making them a good area to source "new and exciting" wines your nearby competitors don't have.

UNSUNG HEROES

Petite Sirah is perfect for today's wine market. It's rich, smooth and teeth-staining. Bogle has made a perch for itself in the bargain range; always fruity and perfect for Millennial consumers. Michael David does this wine affordably from Lodi, and the Eos bottling from the Central Coast is in the same range. J. Lohr does a fine Petite Sirah from Paso Robles. August Sebastiani's 3 Badge Beverage Corp. just added a Lodi Petite Sirah to their Plungerhead line; expect more varietal bottlings, not fewer.

Chenin Blanc was America's favorite wine in the 1970s. After a

LEFT: Ocean breezes and fog make the Sonoma Coast a hotspot for Pinot Noir in particular. RIGHT: Dry Creek Vineyard, in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley, excels in Sauvignon Blanc and Zinfandel from their estate vineyards, but their secret weapon wine is Chenin Blanc, from Clarksburg.

long fall from grace, it's fashionable in New York restaurants again. Yet in some places in California it never went away. Dry Creek Vineyard has been making a delicious and affordable version of this wine for decades. For something with a story behind it, Chappellet continues to make Chenin Blanc even though prices for Cabernet on Pritchard Hill in Napa Valley have gone through the roof. It would make sense for them to uproot the vines, but they like the Chenin so it's still there. Sounds like a shelf talker waiting to happen. ■



Paso Robles, home to plenty of Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, is a good source of power wines that won't break a budget.



RECOMMENDED CHARDS BY STYLE:

Cheaper Chardonnays are often leaner than mid-priced wines because they simply get less ripe grapes. If customers are looking for leaner Chardonnays, you might steer them to spend less and make them extra happy.

LEANER

ForestVille (Bronco Wine Co.) ▶
A by Acacia-Unoaked
Foxglove



BUTTERY

Rodney Strong
Cambria
Stags' Leap Winery ▶



FULL-BODIED BUT FIRM ACID

La Follett
Hanzell
Dutton-Goldfield



OVERALL COMPLEXITY AND BALANCE

Ravenswood ▶
Avalon
Four Vines
Alma Rosa
Clos du Val Carneros
Landmark "Overlook"