



Women love wine, but not how it's marketed

Published: Tuesday, August 24, 2010, 12:00 AM



Special to The Oregonian



Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

Oregon Wines on Broadway owner Kate Boiling (left) says that in her shop, a woman customer is much less likely than a man to be fixated on the number of points a wine has from Robert Parker and more interested in what pleases her own palate.

WINE NOTES:

By KATHERINE COLE

Special to The Oregonian

The word "president" can bring to mind the visage of an African American. The word "marriage" can evoke a gay couple. The word "phone" can conjure an image of a touch-screen device.

But if you hear the term "wine consumer," you probably picture this: "Guys bringing in their Blackberries and looking up Spectator points."

That's the observation of Jody Ruff-Harcourt, wine steward at Fred Meyer Oak Grove and a veteran of the

wine aisles at Fred Meyer's Hawthorne and Hollywood West locations. She's stocked up on cheap Rhônes for savvy young college grads and sweet rieslings for busloads of retirement-home residents. She knows what her customers want. And she can tell you that the corporate wine world has got it wrong when it comes to marketing to women.

At Fred Meyer, Ruff-Harcourt gets plenty of male customers who are intent on looking up point scores on their Blackberries. But in her experience, women are just as savvy: Her female clients belong to wine clubs and attend tastings. They arrive with recipes in hand, determined to find the perfect wine matches. They use smart-phone apps that scan UPC codes on wine bottles and deliver immediate information to the user.

"We've all seen the data about women doing most of the shopping and that women are the prime purchasers of wine. Over the past 10 to 15 years, we've seen wineries trying to market toward women. But no one has really taken the approach of figuring out what women want," observes Dixie Huey, the Portland-area proprietor of Trellis Wine Consulting. "The wine industry doesn't tend to do market research before creating a product. We end up with these silly, unsophisticated products like 'Little Black Dress.' It's almost making fun of women in a way instead of making them feel great."

(Ironically, Huey adds, "There has been a whole directional shift toward marketing wine toward the gay and lesbian communities. I feel like that area is more advanced than marketing toward women.")

"I've seen corporate brands that try to dumb it down for the women's market; they just sit on the shelf," Ruff-Harcourt agrees. "Somebody just made a wine called 'Girly Girl.' I didn't even want to taste it. I would never put that on my shelf. Even if they don't have a palate, women are smart enough to ask questions. They don't buy the frilly stuff."

And while wine marketers appear to be stuck in the 1950s, the stereotype of the typical wine drinker as a gray-haired gentleman carrying a copy of *The Wine Spectator* is outdated. According to the Wine Market Council, 53 percent of American wine drinkers are women. And a recent Gallup poll revealed that 48 percent of women who drink prefer wine, compared to only 17 percent of men.

In addition, the Gallup poll showed that 58 percent of the 50-and-older female demographic are wine drinkers, as opposed to only 21 percent of male drinkers in that age group. American alcohol-consumption rates are the highest they've been since 1985, and higher-income, higher-educated Americans account for the highest proportion of drinkers. A new picture is emerging: that of a savvy, successful woman.

"I get lots of professional females in here," says Kate Bolling, owner of the downtown Portland wine bar and shop Oregon Wines on Broadway. "They are up to speed on Oregon and Washington's premier producers. They have jobs where they have to make decisions. They're pretty matter-of-fact and direct about what they want."

Bolling observes that men tend to be more vocal and competitive about their wine preferences. "Men are

more inclined to give you a quick definition of what they've got in their wine cellar and what they're driving," she says with a laugh. "They're more likely to be posting on eRobertParker board or Cellartracker" (two online forums for wine debate).

By contrast, her female clientele are quieter and more contemplative. "I have several regular customers who are women who come in by themselves. ... Their attitude seems to be more, 'This is what I really like and that's why I want to drink it.' It's really more about 'me time' rather than getting another 95-point trophy to show your friends."

Women do approach wine differently, Huey agrees. "They're not scoring it. They don't have their nose jammed in a glass. They're more interested in relaxing and enjoying the social connection. Given that today's woman is typically juggling a work-and-home balancing act, they see wine as a way of treating themselves."

Follow Oregon's wine scene with Katherine Cole on Twitter at twitter.com/kcoleuncorked and on YouTube at youtube.com/kcoleuncorked. E-mail her at katherine@katherinecole.com.

Targeting female wine drinkers

Forget low-cal wines with patronizing names like "White Lie." Dixie Huey of Trellis Wine Consulting offers advice to Oregon wineries looking to cash in on the largely untapped female market:

Emphasize "the elegance" of wine. California sparkling-wine brands such as Chandon, Sofia and Schramsberg do a good job of playing up the sophistication factor.

Advertise the activity, not the object: "Most of the Oregon ads are still the full-front bottle shot or the photo of the vineyard. There aren't any of people actually enjoying the wine. How about showing women cooking together or sitting at their book club, socializing and enjoying wine as a part of that?"

Most important, "Your company policies have got to be in line with what you are marketing." Huey cites the example of one of her clients, Stoller Vineyards in Dayton, whose female winemaker works a two-thirds schedule. "They hired a cellar master so (the winemaker) can spend more time with her children. That's genuine."

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