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What's new in the Grapevine this week?

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Is “Sommelier” French for snarky?

(This article originally appeared in the Grapevine in 2015)

My friend and America's best wine retailer, Doug Pendleton of Zionsville, Indiana recently posted an e-mail rant in response to an article published in *Somm Journal*, a magazine for sommeliers. The article, authored by Randy Caparoso included this section:

“Chardonnays from California, in particular, are slowly but surely getting crisper, sleeker, less obviously tutti-frutti, a little less oaky or “buttery” and a little less fatty and annoying. Speaking, of course, from a sommelier’s perspective. The customers – our guests, as we call them – have always been right, and thank goodness, more and more of them are becoming a little more “right” about their taste in Chardonnay.”

But if it seems like this sea change in consumer taste has been a long time coming, you still have to ask: How many of us in the on-premise industry still stuff our wine lists with popular brands of Chardonnay that perpetuate that fat, buttery varietal style out of fear that we’ll offend many of our guests if we don’t? You might call it giving-the-customers-what-they-want. I call it enabling.”

Doug Pendleton's response?

“I'm sorry, I must be enabling my customers' poor taste in wine by selling Rombauer Chardonnay. I know that this Somm Journal excerpt was taken from a trade publication never meant to be read by the public, but I think it offers a serious insight into the sommelier mindset that dictates that the tastes of their customers has no relevance to their wine list selections. This rises to the same level of arrogance that the "In Pursuit of Balance" group display in banishing California Cabernets from their lists because the alcohol levels are above 13.9%.

Here in the store (Grapevine Cottage in Zionsville, Ed.) we sell Chardonnays that range from crisp Chablis to big, oaky California wines like Rombauer, and trust me, the oaky wines out-sell the crisp wines four to one! Chardonnay is almost 50% of my white wine business and there is a reason: Americans drink Chardonnay as a cocktail. And without food, most people simply prefer a soft, smooth wine to a crisp, acidic one.”

Doug and I e-mailed back and forth about this subject and both of us agreed that the arrogance of the Somm Journal author was exceeded only by his poor understanding of the role of customer service in a service business. While I may share the opinion that Rombauer Chardonnay is a big, buttery, oaky, virtual caricature of California Chardonnay, I think it is quite tasty on occasion and I don't recall ever turning it down if offered. Not only that, Rombauer Chardonnay has for the last two years been the single highest revenue producing label we have at the Wine Gallery. It may be a big, buttery, oaky virtual caricature of California Chardonnay but it is a big, buttery, oaky, virtual caricature of California Chardonnay that pays my Northwestern Energy bill each month.

Doug and I also took umbrage in the “enabler” label. Are we prostituting some virtue by providing products that many of our customers enjoy? Evidently Rombauer makes a high quality product with broad appeal and it probably pays a good portion of Randy Caparosa's sommelier salary-- considering he sells it for \$85 per bottle.

Now, I have heard enough of the nose in the air attitude about oaky wines. I have a distributor who calls over-oaked wines “catnip”. The American palate loves oaky Cab, Merlot, Chardonnay and whatever else comes that way. Maybe restaurant owners keep those Chardonnays on the list because they enhance revenue. Just because the chef loves cow udder and liver doesn't mean you take steak and baked potatoes off the menu. If so many people like Rombauer, how is

it not “right”? Who’s to say Chablis is “right”? As Doug Pendleton noted, the public votes with their wallets.

Sometimes I think Sommelier is French for a license to be snarky. No one forces Randy Caparosa to drink Rombauer so he shouldn’t force people to drink wine they don’t care for just because he has a *taste vin*. To me this oaky Chardonnay deal is like trying to sell size 4 shoes to someone who wears size 8. Why is there a snarky judgment attached to an expression of taste? Why sneer at the very people who keep you employed?

One thing I learned from Doug Pendleton a long time ago is that our customers already know what they like and what they don’t like. Understanding that, imposing my taste or preferences on a customer makes me extremely uncomfortable. So are the Wine Gallery Staff “enablers” because we help people find wine they like? We can help folks find wines that they have never tried but have a similar profile to their favorite wine. There is nothing wrong with expanding customers’ horizons. However, to tell a customer what they should like and what they shouldn’t like just seems pedantic and egotistical.

If owning a wine store and taking good care of customers’ needs makes me an “enabler”, I will wear the badge with pride.

Should I worry about Roundup in wine?

Trace amounts of glyphosate, the active ingredient in Bayer’s herbicide Roundup, a weed killer, are showing up in wine and beer, according to a new report from the U.S. Public Research Group (USPIRG) Education Fund. A certain amount of glyphosate is allowed in food and beverages under U.S. environmental law, and none of the beers and wines that USPIRG tested contained anywhere near that amount. But that doesn’t mean they’re necessarily completely free of glyphosate even though they are more than safe for human consumption, USPIRG noted.

California’s Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) adopted a regulation in 2018 establishing a No Significant Risk Level (NSRL) for glyphosate of 1,100 micrograms per day. If you are worried, the level that might be found in wine, if any, is insignificant compared to the NSRL. Because of this, wine is exempt from a new requirement to display warning signs for glyphosate within California.

“While these levels of glyphosate are below EPA risk tolerances for beverages, it is possible that even low levels of glyphosate can be problematic,” according to the study. “For example, in one study, scientists found that 1 part

per trillion of glyphosate has the potential to stimulate the growth of breast cancer cells and disrupt the endocrine system.” Really? One part in trillion has the “potential” to stimulate cancer? One bowl of Cheerios would kill us all!

A wine lover would have to drink a lot of wine for the herbicide to affect their health, according to one expert. “An adult would have to drink 140 glasses of wine a day containing the highest glyphosate level ever measured every day for 70 years just to reach the U.S. EPA’s preliminary level of health concern,” Carl Winter, professor of food toxicology at the University of California at Davis, is quoted as saying on a blog for the Wine Institute, a wine industry advocacy group. I say anyone who can absorb the alcohol in 140 glasses of wine (=28 bottles) per day shouldn’t fear Kryptonite let alone traces of a weed killer.

Deals on Paul Hobbs Crossbarn Wines

This last week we were able to get the “Big Boy” discounts on two Paul Hobbs Crossbarn series wines. We bought a bunch and the result is that we have better pricing than Wine.com and Total Wine.

Take the **2017 Crossbarn Chardonnay** for instance. Robert Parker gave it 91 points and James Suckling rated it 92. “Glistening straw yellow with a faint green hue and fragrant aromas of white flower, Asian pear, and wet stone underpin the wine’s expression of its true Sonoma Coast roots. Alluring stone fruit flavors carry the palate along with hints of citrus and honeysuckle that evolve into a creamy mid-palate before ending in a long, clean finish with crisp acidity.” At the big box retailers, we found \$29 per bottle; from the Wine Gallery, it is just **\$25.95**.

Similarly, **the 2016 Crossbarn Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** shows Big Box at \$36-37 per bottle. We have it for **\$31.95** and that includes the 92 points from James Suckling and 91 from Robert Parker. Medium to deep ruby-purple colored, the 2016 Pinot Noir offers lovely baked raspberries, black cherries and mulberries notes with touches of chocolate box, earth, menthol and dried herbs with a waft of violets. Medium to full-bodied, the palate is laden with red and black berries flavors plus earthy/herbal undertones and a plush frame, finishing with refreshing clarity.

Be sure to check our “Featured Wine Table” at the front of the store for more great deals. Don’t leave without checking our clearance table at the back. We have loads of great wines that have gone on to the next vintage or are distributor close-outs on the Clearance Table. They are great wines that need a good home. Prices on Clearance Wines is 15% off retail.