Getting Wines Into Local Restaurants

Wine Marketing

Did you know that fifty percent of consumers who "try and enjoy a wine brand at a restaurant or bar" are likely to purchase the wine for "at-home enjoyment." Just another reason for wineries to pursue restaurant sales. 1

What appears to influence restaurant wine purchases? According to 500 U.S. wine consumers who participated in a 2013 study, three of the top four factors that "could influence [them] to order wine more often" at a restaurant were associated with discounts:

- "specials or deals" (selected by 40 percent of participants)
- "lower everyday prices" (32 percent)
- "specials on/wine and food pairings" (27 percent)
- "wider variety of wines available" (27 percent) 2

As to how much participants would pay for wine at a restaurant, slightly over a third (38 percent) would pay between $7.50 and $10 for a glass of wine and a third would pay between $5.00 and $7.50. Pertaining to the price they would pay for a bottle of wine, 39 percent would pay between $25.00 and $50.00 and 35 percent would pay between $10.00 and $25.00. 3

The presence of alcoholic beverages affects a consumer's likelihood of returning to a particular restaurant or recommending the restaurant to others. Based on data, 40.8 percent of those who ordered wine at a restaurant indicated that they "strongly agreed" that they would return to the restaurant "in the near future," compared to 42.5 percent of participants who ordered spirits/mixed drinks/cocktails and 38.5 percent of those who ordered beer. While 39.6 percent of those who ordered wine would recommend the restaurant to others, slightly more participants who ordered spirits/mixed drinks/cocktails (41.6 percent) would do so as well, and slightly fewer participants who ordered beer at the restaurant (35.6 percent) would recommend the establishment to others. 4

Know Who to Approach and What to Expect

Depending on the restaurant setup and location, wineries may be forced to contact a series of people in a number of professions in order to talk about their wines:

- Chef: an individual trained in culinary arts that is likely in charge of directing the kitchen
- Sommelier: an individual trained in wine and food pairing
- Beverage manager: an individual typically in charge of beverage operations for a restaurant

Each individual will have various requirements regarding information that they will want to know about your wines. For example, a chef will likely want to know how your wine will pair with the cuisine in the restaurant or technical facts in terms of what makes your wine more interesting than your neighbor's. Sommeliers will want to know wine facts, including vineyard and production information. When talking to both a chef and sommelier, be ready to taste the wines with them and tell them the wine's story. Beverage managers typically want to know more business-related information (e.g., how your wine can save them money).

Targeting Restaurants

There are three types of restaurants that wineries can try to target:

1. Chain restaurants
2. Medium-casual independent restaurants or local, suburban restaurants
3. Medium-fine-dining independent restaurants, which are typically located in inner-city areas

Chain restaurants typically do not have much independent power in terms of choosing items that are on the menu,
including wines or alcoholic beverages. However, chefs and sommeliers at independently owned restaurants have more or complete control over the food and/or drink menus.

Consumers eating at medium-casual restaurants are more likely to “try new wines” compared to consumers at fine-dining establishments. In this case, the restaurant may have limited wine-serving staff or the wines may be expected to “sell themselves.” Many local wineries have found greater success in profits affiliated with medium-casual independent restaurants. Consider restaurants that are willing to work with local products or that serve cuisine that will pair nicely with your wines.

Fine-dining establishments, however, act as a validation tool for many wineries (i.e., bragging rights). Local wines found in finer restaurants progress the winery and regional reputation forward. For this reason, it is recommended that wineries strategize to establish wine sales in both medium-casual and fine-dining establishments.

Set up Appointments

Wines will find little success in dropping bottles off at a restaurant for a chef and/or sommelier to taste. In fact, bottles left at a restaurant are likely to get forgotten quickly.

Instead, wineries should make appointments with the chef and/or sommelier during a time that is convenient for them. During this appointment, prepare to taste your wines (make sure the wines are properly chilled or prepared for tasting), and discuss technical details related to the wines. If you need help considering what wine facts may be of interest to a sommelier, consider taking an introductory wine appreciation certification program through organizations like the Society of Wine Educators or Wine and Spirits Education Trust. Learning their interest and language can help improve communication and enhance wine sales.

If you are ignored by a chef and/or sommelier, be persistent. Offer to bring your wines to a blind tasting event. Strategically pair your wines against well-known benchmark wines that will highlight the quality of your wines. Additionally, have a positive and kind attitude about your business and wines; it works to the advantage of many local wineries.

Always be prepared for criticism by those who taste your wine. A professional will highlight the craft or positive aspects of your wine even if they do not like it. Additionally, some sommeliers may be able to appreciate the style or variety, but may not see a place for it on the wine list due to pricing, too much availability of that variety/style, or that they do not prefer the wine. Do not get discouraged. There are plenty of other restaurants to approach.

Make It Easy for Restaurants to Pour Your Wines

One of the largest challenges for restaurants is receiving local wines. Here is a list of possibilities that wineries can do in order to enhance the restaurant-winery relationship:

- Offer weekly or bi-monthly wine deliveries to the restaurant.
- Organize weekly deliveries for five or more local wineries that can deliver to five or more restaurants.
- Ship wines directly to the restaurant. If wineries are willing to pay for the cost of shipping, restaurants can better price wines by the glass or bottle that are more reflective of the retail price.
- Negotiate wine pricing.
- Always remember, if the restaurant cannot come to the winery, bring the winery to the restaurant.

Form Relationships and Market for Each Other

Restaurants act as a gateway to marketing your wine by “word-of-mouth” sales. Be prepared by following up with restaurants twice per month. This is just enough of an effort to keep them interested in you without causing a burden in their day-to-day operations.

Tourists offer a large opportunity for local wineries. Prepare marketing material that can be kept at the restaurant for tourists to grab as they leave the winery. Check on the restaurant to see if they need extra marketing material during each followup session. It is possible that this may enhance winery visitors.

Also, market the restaurants that you work with regularly. Keep restaurant marketing material on hand in the tasting room or create your own to highlight those restaurants that feature your wines. Some wineries have created restaurant lists, maps/directions, or feature individual brochures for restaurants that feature local wines. You may also consider organizing dual events, such as winemaker dinners at the restaurant or chef pairings at the winery.

Notes


3. Ibid.


Additional Resources

- "Fall in Love with Pennsylvania all Over Again: Perspectives on the Local Wines in Local Restaurants by a Sommelier" by Denise M. Gardner.
- "Getting Wines into Local Restaurants" by Dr. Kathy Kelley.

Authors

Kathy Kelley, Ph.D.
Professor of Horticultural Marketing and Business Management
KathyKelley@psu.edu
814-863-2196

Denise M. Gardner
Former Penn State Extension Associate in Enology

extension.psu.edu

Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research and extension programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Where trade names appear, no discrimination is intended, and no endorsement by Penn State Extension is implied.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

Penn State is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, and is committed to providing employment opportunities to all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability, or protected veteran status.

© The Pennsylvania State University 2024

Code: ART-2116