



In the Name of Good Taste

WHY LISTING SUB-APPELLATIONS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

BACK IN THE 1990s, I used to hear this all the time from colleagues in the on-premise industry: “Why should I sell esoteric wines? My customers couldn’t care less. All they want is [fill in the blank].” At the time, of course, “blank” was Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, or White Zinfandel.

Times have obviously changed. The business of restaurant wine sales is much more fun than it was 20 or 30 years ago because consumers are more sophisticated and open-minded about unconventional varieties than ever before; retail stores and e-commerce have exposed them to the world’s incredible range of wines, while online resources have helped turn what was once obscure into common knowledge. As a result, many sommeliers now find that it is just as easy to sell, say, Albariño, Assyrtiko, Ribolla Gialla, Trousseau, Tempranillo, Lagrein, or any of the like as it is the aforementioned varieties.

So what is the next step for sommeliers conscious of playing a proactive role

in the evolution of wine consumers? That would be the recognition of sub-appellations, particularly for American wines. When perusing lists even in wine-savvy restaurants, I am still surprised to find descriptions that rarely (if ever) go beyond broad categories such as Napa Valley, Santa Barbara, Willamette Valley, or even Washington and Oregon.

Hey, I get it. It’s like the ‘90s all over again in that many guests “couldn’t care less” about the sensory differences between a Cabernet Sauvignon grown in Coombsville and one grown in Ruthersford; a Chardonnay from Fort Ross-Seaview versus one from Green Valley of Russian River Valley; or a Pinot Noir from Sta. Rita Hills or Santa Lucia Highlands as opposed to one from McMinnville or Chehalem. The potential minutiae can still make the average consumer’s head spin. But as a professional, you know these distinctions exist in the most tangible ways—you can taste it in the glass. It’s on you to communicate the fact that, ultimately, terroir is what sets the finest

wines of the world apart from the rest rather than grape variety, blend composition, or brand prestige. It’s a challenge, but getting guests to appreciate terroir-related distinctions is paramount to promoting good taste, and it begins with the precise identification of American appellations and sub-appellations on your wine list, following the same standard typically used for European wines.

The beautiful thing about domestic wines is that they are better and more terroir-driven than ever. U.S. producers see the writing on the wall: Many consumers are getting too knowledgeable to equate quality with branding or concepts such as “varietal character.” Similarly, fewer and fewer people are choosing wines based upon numerical ratings. Just as sommeliers have for years, they’re seeing right through that facade and looking instead for wines that express an authentic sense of place.

This is progress, and it’s happening as we speak. It’s a good time to be a sommelier and play an active role in it. **SJ**