



Friend or Foe

ON WORKING WITH—AND SOMETIMES WORKING AROUND—DISTRIBUTORS

PHOTO COURTESY OF RANDY CAPAROSO



The author circa 1998, when he won Restaurant Wine's "Concept of the Year Award."

DURING MY 25 or so years as an on-premise wine buyer, I had distributor and supplier colleagues who were my best friends—or my worst enemies.

An enemy, for instance, would be someone who plays golf with your boss and tells him I am his worst possible hire. (True story—my boss told me.) I suppose, from his perspective, I was a bad hire because I was not inclined to buy all his wines, but I would say he was an unreliable source.

At one point, I was running wine programs in nearly 20 locations in ten different states. I had one close friend who worked as a supplier in several of those markets, so I knew my name inevitably came up in conversation. One day I asked her: What do distributors think of me out there? She said, "You kidding me? Most of them *hate* you."

I was not surprised. They probably saw

me as more of a nightmare than a friend because, whenever the business I worked for entered a market, we came in with a basic program common to all our stores. It's not like I wasn't aware that a distributor's job is to place new products and make their quotas. (Later on, for six years, I operated my own wine label and also had to implement sales incentives with my distributors in 12 different states.)

I did, however, do my best to maintain good relationships in every market. Local distributors and suppliers were welcome to make their pitches, providing they were cognizant of our cuisine and our emphasis on wines with versatile pairing abilities. Everyone was informed of that priority in black and white on a sheet passed out to minimize wasted time or disappointment, although proposed wines could come from anywhere and be made from any grape or blend, giving salespeople lots of leeway.

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Consequently, a large percentage of the wine list in each location did ultimately, in fact, consist of wines unique to it, expanding upon the aforementioned basic program. If they sold well, we'd share that information with our on-premise buyers and work to incorporate them into the lists at other locations. This was never a guarantee because not all wines are available in every city or state, but it was probably easier for our restaurant group to get wines into new markets because we were accustomed to working directly with wineries and importers, something part and parcel of multi-unit operations.

In fact, if there's anything I'd share with sommeliers and on-premise buyers today, it would be that you should never be satisfied only by what you find in a local distributor's or importer's book. If you are aware of other wines that you would prefer, you should explicitly ask for them. If, as is often the case, your local distributor refuses to fulfill your requests, then you need to go directly to the source, typically the principals at wineries or import companies. I know for a fact that vintners are thrilled to hear directly from restaurateurs. If you go the extra mile, you get the extra wines that make you special.

Of course, by saying this I know I am not going to please a lot of distributors or suppliers across the country. Then again, many of them never liked me anyhow! **\$J**