

Benefit of the Doubt

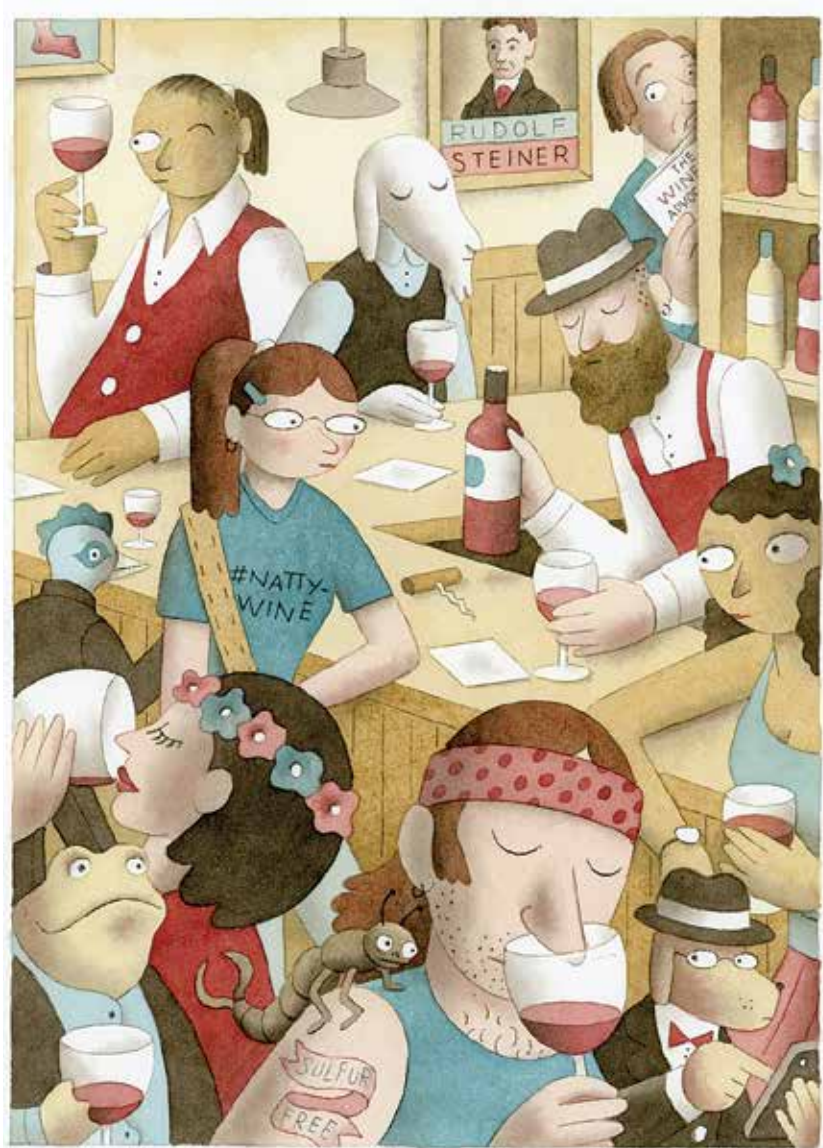
WINE CONSUMERS
ARE A LOT SMARTER
THAN YOU THINK

FOR AS LONG as I've been in this business, the American wine industry has treated consumers as though they were idiots. I don't get it, because it couldn't be further from the truth. Consider, for example, how they're able to adapt to rapidly changing technology or the latest trends in music, film, food, and fashion; even if they don't understand something, they're savvy enough to figure it out quickly, ensuring that they're never truly left behind.

Yet when it comes to wine, producers, distributors, media, and hospitality pros alike treat consumers as if they are slow learners who can barely understand more than four or five varietals at a time. When Jancis Robinson first published her pocket-sized *Guide to Wine Grapes*, she listed over 700 grape varieties grown commercially around the world, while later editions included as many as 1,368. Why so many? It's called consumer demand.

The way we stack our restaurant wine lists is a reflection of the industry's overall attitude toward consumers. A typical "award-winning" wine list will have 100 Cabernet Sauvignons, 50 Chardonnays, and maybe a couple of Zinfandels and one Chenin Blanc, but nothing "weird" like Graciano or Biancolella. Almost no cool, new producers will be represented, while the big commercial brands sold everywhere will dominate. There will be nothing from out-of-the-way appellations because—well, we assume our guests can't possibly understand or appreciate alternative grapes, unknown brands, or unfamiliar appellations, no matter how amazing the wines may taste with our cuisines.

So we spoon-feed them like babies and chuckle about their penchant for “thinking dry and drinking sweet.” But it’s not



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that consumers are dumb; rather, it's that we, the so-called professionals, are lazy—too lazy to make an effort to give them what they deserve, which is as much variety on the wine list as they find on the menus prepared by many of our über-talented chefs. Guests, as we all know, always come in for the food. They understand brand-new dishes, and even if they've never heard of every ingredient that goes into them, they are more

than eager to experience them.

In short, if you assume your guests are capable of appreciating only a few wines at a time, then that's what you get—guests with narrow tastes; those who are utterly bored by your meager selection will simply go elsewhere. But if you treat them like people with the capacity to learn about and appreciate just about anything you throw at them, then you get the predictable results: You sell a lot more wine! **SJ**