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ON WINE

How Millennials Are Changing Wine

They're the reason you use emojis instead of email and Snapchats instead of real chats. But will millennials also upend the wine establishment? As Lettie Teague discovers, this relationship status is complicated.



ILLUSTRATION: JANNE IIVONEN



By

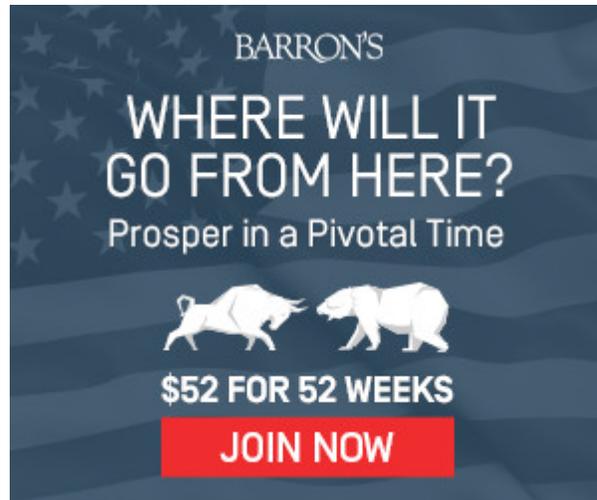
Lettie Teague

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“SO MANY MILLENNIALS ARE interested more in the narrative of the wine rather than the wine,” said Jason Jacobeit, the 29-year-old head sommelier of Bâtard restaurant in New York. “A lot of mediocre wine is being sold on the basis of a story.”

Mr. Jacobeit lamented the fact that few of his generational peers took the time to understand why certain wines are greater than others. The rustic sparkling wine Pét-Nat (short for pétillant-naturel), for example, may be hip and fun, but it will never be as great as Champagne. Mr. Jacobeit said that his peers need to learn to distinguish the difference between “being excited about wine and wine that is genuinely exciting.”

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Taylor Parsons, the 35-year-old wine director of République in Los Angeles attributes these “gaps” in millennials’ wine knowledge to their incessant search for the next cool thing, be it orange wine or Slovenian Chardonnay. “We get tons of requests for Slovenian Chardonnay,” he said.

Which might just mean you’ll soon be seeing many more Slovenian Chardonnays on restaurant wine lists. After all, millennials have been heralded as the generation capable of changing everything. The largest generation to date at 75 million strong, they certainly have clout. This group of 18- to 34-year-olds is technologically savvy, environmentally engaged and eager for stories about the things they love. They’ve helped transform the way we connect with one another, but will they also (re)shape the way we drink? I’d say “perhaps,” although a millennial might answer “Yaaaasssss!”

In search of an answer, I talked to as many millennial sommeliers, winemakers, retailers and wine drinkers as I could. I also began combing through piles of data, starting with an August survey from Wine Opinions, a California-based wine-research group. In the survey, the results of which will be released later this month, the group polled 2,634 wine drinkers from three generations—millennials, Gen X and boomers—about their wine preferences, buying habits and information sources.

One of the biggest divides turned out to be the numerical rating system. Millennials regard the 100-point scale as the creation—and the provenance—of their older wine-drinking peers. They won’t be “duped” into buying an expensive wine just because some

Oenofile

Five wines worthy of a like, tweet, selfie or snap



1 of 5



2012 Jorge Ordóñez & Co. Botani Sparkling Muscat

\$16

Moscato is the big wine success story across all generations of drinkers, and there are two basic types: cheap and good. This sparkling Muscat from Spain is both. Low in alcohol (5%), exotically floral, slightly sweet but balanced by a bright acidity, it's a delightful and uncomplicated drink.

F. MARTIN RAMIN / THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

critic awarded it 92 points; they value stories and a personal connection.

Though their rebellious tastes can lead them into trouble, millennials' enthusiasm for the obscure has also been a boon. As Mr. Parsons observed, it means "you can have a restaurant wine list today without Napa Cabernet or New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc," two wines that achieved fame thanks to Gen Xers and boomers.

But a wine list designed to appeal to millennials shouldn't be too pricey. According to Wine Opinions, they spend less money per bottle than their older peers—79% of regular millennial wine drinkers bought wines in the \$10-\$15 range. (This isn't all that surprising since most young wine drinkers have less money to spend.)

So how and where are millennials getting their wine education? "Millennials don't like ratings, but they like some kind of review," said Adam Teeter, the 32-year-old editor and co-founder of VinePair, a New York-based online wine magazine for millennials. "They have a great thirst for knowledge."

That's why you'll find a good deal of VinePair editorial content devoted to educational articles, including an extensive Wine 101 section where readers can learn the names of important grapes and how to taste wine. It's also why Mr. Teeter says some of his non-

wine-professional friends have sought to become certified sommeliers. “I don’t remember my parents’ friends having sommelier certification,” he said.

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I thought about pointing out that sommelier certification was virtually nonexistent when Gen Xers—let alone boomers—were growing up, but I held my tongue. After all, the Wine Opinions research showed that only 17% of millennials care what a wine columnist like me says. In fact, just 22% subscribe to a print wine magazine or newsletter—

that’s about half the percentage of Gen Xers (41%). All three generations, however, surf the Web for wine information. Interestingly, baby boomers and Gen Xers went online even more than millennials, with 65% of Gen Xers looking on the Web, versus 61% of boomers and 50% of millennials.

There were other points of convergence in Wine Opinions’ data, and the three generations seemed to agree more often than not. For example, when asked if they would buy a bottle they’d never tried or a new wine by the glass, 86% of millennials said that they would; 72% of baby boomers said they would, too. All three liked red wine more than white or sparkling, and they all liked Moscato.

Yet with conventional wisdom holding that millennials don’t care about luxury and aren’t loyal to brands, it’s little wonder that wine producers all over the world—like every other business—are scrambling to figure out what they want.

And it’s safe to say that whatever millennials do want, they’ll probably get it; by 2017, they’ll have more buying power than any other demographic group. So though boomers and Gen Xers helped build and sustain the wine business over the years, companies big and small are paying attention to millennial habits and marketing their products accordingly.

E.&J. Gallo Winery’s Carnivor Cabernet is a perfect example. Launched in 2013 and priced at \$15, the wine is aimed at young male drinkers. “Millennials are very driven by word-of-mouth, so we engage key influencers in conversation about our product,” Molly Davis, Gallo’s vice president of marketing, wrote in an email about the brand’s strategy.



ILLUSTRATION: JANNE IIVONEN

In other words, they send bottles to bloggers and hold tasting events. Carnivor Cabernet's website is heavy on social media, promoting the hashtag #DevourLife and featuring a feed from its Instagram account. And the company has put together a guide to meat cuts, with recipes, in the hope of furthering its millennial appeal.

SIPPING BY THE NUMBERS

The majority of millennials are now over the legal drinking age in America, and the habits they acquire might shape the wine industry. Get a glimpse of the future with these factoids from Wine Opinions' 2015 survey of wine-drinking millennials.

- 54% haven't purchased—and have no interest in purchasing—wine in a can.
- 86% buy a bottle or glass of wine they've never tried before at least two to three times a month.
- 22% subscribe to a print wine magazine, newsletter or other publication.
- 85% have met someone after work for a glass of wine at least once in the past month.
- 43% have visited four or more winery tasting rooms in the past 12 months.
- 61% have commented on wine on Facebook or read the wine comments of others on Facebook in the past month.
- 72% have posted a photo on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest or other social media showing wine they enjoyed in the past month.

While it was interesting to read about millennials and talk about millennials, I wanted to actually taste with millennials. So I assembled a mini-focus group, with two men and two women ranging in age from 25 to 32. While my group's wine knowledge was limited, they were enthusiastic and one of them had recently joined a wine club.

I bought wines that millennials were purported to like: Prosecco, a red blend (Bordeaux), Riesling, Beaujolais, Moscato, Malbec and an obscure wine with hipster cred—Cour-Cheverny, a white wine from the Loire Valley. I spent around \$15-\$20 a bottle, staying close to their favored price point.

The group didn't particularly like the Prosecco I'd chosen. The Le Vigne di Alice Doro (\$20) was too fruity, they said. In fact, they didn't much like Prosecco at all. They did like

‘Millennials have been heralded as the generation capable of changing everything. The largest generation to date at 75 million strong, they certainly have clout.’

the slightly sweet and frothy 2012 Jorge Ordonez & Co. Botani Sparkling Muscat (\$16) from Spain, but none could recall ever buying a Moscato before.

The same was true for the Riesling. Although they liked the 2014 Nik Weis St. Urbans-Hof Wiltinger Alte Reben (\$17) from Mosel, it wasn’t a wine they’d ever think about buying because they didn’t know much about German wines. “Aren’t they all sweet?” asked Rachel, a 30-year-old freelance fashion consultant.

The Cour-Cheverny was acceptable, but the back story I told them—an obscure white grape (Romorantin) that almost disappeared—was deemed unconvincing. “Maybe if the story was more interesting I would have liked the wine more,” said Steven, a 32-year-old lawyer. In this regard, at least, my focus group supported the research I’d found.

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Egidio, a 25-year-old financier, preferred Italian reds above all. They were the wines his father had taught him to love. (Both he and Steven had wine-collecting fathers.) As for the Beaujolais, a 2013 Fleurie

from Château de Fleurie, it was simply “too light.”

They loved the rich, lush, concentrated 2013 Achaval Ferrer Mendoza Malbec (\$18), and all knew something about Malbec. But they said that there were too many different types. “I would never order a Malbec in a restaurant. It’s too various, unlike a Cabernet,” said 28-year-old Leah, a public-relations professional.

The red blend was a hit as well—though none of them knew that Bordeaux was a blend. The 2010 Château SÉNÉJAC Haut-Médoc Cru Bourgeois (\$24) initially failed to thrill—too tannic and dry, according to Leah—but when I suggested trying it with some cheese, the wine was transformed.

When it came to buying wine, three of the four said they sought the counsel of retailers, while Egidio asked his father's advice. None consulted online sources or, of course, magazines. They preferred a personal connection to the person making the suggestions. "You really want someone with experience who knows you," Steven said. This may have been a classic millennial attitude, but it's something I've heard said by many Gen Xers and boomers as well.

Will millennials in the end "revolutionize" wine—or banking or dining, for that matter? Will they render wine scores obsolete and classic wines like Bordeaux and Burgundy mere runners up to...Slovenian Chardonnay? Perhaps. They've certainly done their part to promote small producers creating interesting wines in odd corners of the globe. But to truly claim their position as the most powerful consumers in the world, they'll need to develop a broader context and a deeper understanding of the entire world of wine—and not just an appreciation of a good story or a few obscure grapes.

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