

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPORTERS

By Brian Freedman

Importers are the unsung heroes of the wine world. Yet for all but the most unrepentant wine-geeks, they remain relatively unknown, their work going unnoticed and unlauded despite its immeasurable influence on what we all drink.

But this, I suspect, is about to change. In fact, it has to. For these days, with more wine available on the retail level than ever before, knowing what to pluck from the wine-shop shelves is a prospect fraught with risk: Beyond the producers of particular importance to each collector, past the names whose fame extends well past the world of wine (Lafite, Margaux), how are you supposed to know what's worth buying?

Most people allow their decisions to be guided in one (or both) of two ways: They read the popular wine magazines or they seek the advice of trusted retailers. But there is a third strategy to help ensure that your wine purchasing is successful, one that far too few serious wine-drinkers ever employ: Consider the importer.

As wine has become ever more popular in this country – and ever more democratized (vis-à-vis so-called critter labels, whose presence on bottles of inexpensive plonk is often used to entice novices to buy a particular bottle based solely on its aesthetic appeal) – judging one bottle against another, with no prior knowledge of either, has become nearly impossible to do, with any sense of confidence.

Unless, that is, you have a basic knowledge of importers. Each one, after all, tends to have a specific style, or at the very least an overarching philosophy, guiding what they work with. So if you familiarize yourself with the kinds of wines that each of the major ones works with, you will be able to make a much more well-informed decision when it comes time to purchase wine than you otherwise would have.

Counterintuitive though it may seem, then, flip that bottle over and take a look at the back label. Beyond all the often overheated prose about the magnificence of the nectar inside, beyond the Surgeon General's warning, beyond the listing of the alcohol content, the single most important piece of information back there is the name of the importer.

These are the people who literally scour the world for the next big thing in wine – or, at the very least, for that unheralded gem that no one has ever seen before. In a very real sense, the best importers are responsible for introducing people to wines they otherwise would not ever have access to. They go through the effort of weeding out the mediocre, for example, so that you only have to drink the good stuff.

Depending on what kind of wines you gravitate toward, you will likely tend to favor one or two firms over the others. Rosenthal Wine Merchant, Ltd., for example, is an excellent one for small producers from southern France, though they do work with producers from as far north as Champagne and Alsace, as well as Italy.



Eric Solomon Selections brings in wines from countries as varied as Switzerland, South Africa and France, among others. But it is with their Spanish wines that they achieve perhaps their greatest renown. Legendary Clos Erasmus from Priorat, Aalto from Ribera del Duero and Rioja's Artadi are all available on this side of the Pond because of Solomon's efforts.

But personally, there are few importers' names that speak more loudly or more clearly to me than Michael Skurnik. Based in Syosset, New York, Michael Skurnik Wines brings in some of the most remarkable bottlings available today. Indeed, even when I'm not familiar with the wine itself, I'll more often than not buy a bottle or two if I see the Skurnik label on the back of the bottle.

They work, among many, many others, with Cobos and Bramare, the Argentinean projects of the legendary Paul Hobbs (the 2005 Bramare Chardonnay from the Marchiori Vineyard should be a required purchase for lovers of powerful chardonnay); Joh. Jos. Christoffel Erben and Selbach-Oster, two of my favorite riesling producers from the Mosel; and Barolo master Domenico Clerico from Italy's Piedmonte region.

There are others, of course. And the importers that appeal to you may very well be different from the ones that speak most seductively to your wine-lover friends. The trick is to taste widely and learn as much as you can about the importers whose wines you enjoy most. And, for that matter, the ones whose wines you tend not to love. Because that name on the back label is one more piece of information that you can use to make a wise decision when shopping for wine. And it could lead to some very pleasant surprises during an otherwise ordinary shopping excursion.

WINE OF THE MONTH

Pierre Gimonnet et Fils 1er Cru Brut Blanc de Blancs N.V.

Lead pencil and a crystal-clear sense of minerality define the nose of this Champagne, though there's also a bit of Asian pear there, too. The palate brings flavors of slate and wet river stones as well as a bracing acidity that's tempered by an unexpected creaminess. This 100% chardonnay is exactly the kind of elegant, infinitely interesting wine I expect from the Michael Skurnik portfolio.



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