

California wine's chance to polish global image



Jon Bonne, The Chronicle

Chefs at work at Kitchen Table, a top London restaurant that features emerging California wines next to Burgundy and grower Champagne.

By Jon Bonné

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London -- How is California, specifically its wine, projecting itself abroad?

All the talk right this moment is about Asia and its growing thirst. And that's crucial, for sure.

But a recent week here provided some upbeat signs

about what California can accomplish - and a few stark reminders about how the world has perceived its wines of late.

While U.S. wine exports, mostly from California, aren't where they were at their peak five years ago, at least by volume, there were still 47.2 million cases sent overseas last year, and at a record high average bottle price. (Of course, at \$2.53 per bottle, up from \$1.54 in 2008, there's still room for trading up.)



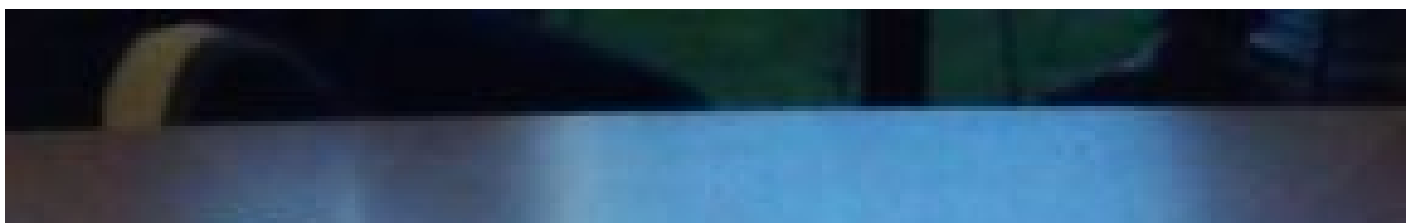
It was heartening, then, to see lesser known names, wines like Foxglove Cabernet and Birichino's irresistible Malvasia Bianca, on the lists of top-flight London restaurants like Story and Kitchen Table, along with longtime believers in the U.K. market like Au Bon Climat and Ridge, which looked to Europe a while ago, in the doldrum years when critical praise at home was scarce.

Why the optimism? Because of the shift it shows from the split personality California has offered in most export markets. The state has been represented in an elite way by a small handful of very fancy, and very expensive, wines - primarily from Napa - that painted California as a big-ticket home for ambition.

But it was mostly known for the same big-brand fodder that populates supermarket shelves at home.

And much as Americans might grumble about our flawed three-tier system and the dominance of a few huge brands, the United Kingdom's supermarket-driven wine market is far more merciless - full of thirsty consumers, few of whom want to pay much more than £4.99 (\$7.75). If California won't quench their thirst, Argentina or Italy will. Hence bulk shipments of cheap California wines show up at U.K. ports, to be bottled and put on shelves. For many Britons, California comes in the form of Gallo Moscato and Diageo's Blossom Hill.

Indeed, for much of the world this is the image of California wine.



Story

8 course menu £65

Bread and dripping

Burnt onion, apple, gin and thyme

Stallops, cucumber and dill ash

Lamb, salad root, garlic and sheep yoghurt

Rhubarb and custard cream soda

Three Bears' porridge

10 course menu £65

Bread and dripping

Burnt onion, apple, gin and thyme

Stallops, cucumber and dill ash

Crab, smoked lamb, rapeseed, pear and lovage

Heritage potato, asparagus and barley grass

Beetroot, raspberry and horseradish

Lamb, salad root, garlic and sheep yoghurt

Rhubarb and custard cream soda

Lemon

Three Bears' porridge

A menu at Story, another top London restaurant that features small-production California wines.

So this arrival of smaller names, of Californian bottles that parallel what the British consumer might find from, say, the Languedoc or the Loire? They are utterly crucial if California wants to sidestep the fate that befell, say, the Australian industry: a global image defined by its simplest, cheapest output.

To see even a few small new labels appear in a voracious wine market like London shows seeds of interest in the changes taking place in California - a thirst for wines very different from the sweet, confectioned styles of recent years.

Why does such small-time evangelism matter? For one, we're in a moment when legitimate artisanship - gastronomically, at least - is crucial not only in San Francisco and New York, but also in London and Paris (and Minneapolis and Atlanta).

The British are eating local farmstead cheeses and revering their produce in a way that would make a Ferry Plaza regular smile. When this devotion comes to food, wine eventually follows.

There is a chance, then, to repaint California wine's image on a human scale around the globe. It's a chance to polish a reputation - to provide substance to the rest of the world's love for our sunny abundance.

The other option: We dig in our heels, enjoy some temporary shine from wine lovers here at home and allow big-time California continue to define our image as global markets evolve. With Diageo's new CEO telling the Daily Telegraph that such markets as China and Africa are at the core of its growth strategy, California is likely to become as well known for its wines as its output from Hollywood.

But it's crucial for good, serious California bottles to appear in those markets as well, and here's why: Projecting yourself as a repository for cheap wine never pays off long-term. Just ask high-end Australian producers what wines like Yellow Tail did to their image abroad. Is California meant to be viewed as a source for a few exorbitant wines, plus a lot of cheap, mediocre ones?

Expanding the presence of the industry's emerging middle isn't easy. Elite small wineries like Calera spent decades building export markets like Japan - and the smaller the winery, the harder it is. For a French vigneron to ship a few hundred cases across the English Channel is a lot easier than sending a container across the Atlantic.

So if a bottle of Malvasia from a lesser-known corner of Monterey shows up 6,000 miles away, it is a truly handy bit of ambassadorship: letting the rest of the world know that California has more to offer than the very expensive and the industrial.

Jon Bonné is The San Francisco Chronicle's wine editor. Find more of his coverage at sfchronicle.com/food/wine. E-mail: jbonne@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@jbonne](https://twitter.com/jbonne)



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