

Vinexpo Explorer Brings Wine Buyers to Sonoma County

by *Kerana Todorov*

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Sonoma County wine producers who want to export their wines overseas are meeting buyers this week from as far away as India, Taiwan and Indonesia.

Bordeaux-based Vinexpo Explorer invited about 70 buyers to Santa Rosa to the trade show to taste wine, visit wineries and learn more about Sonoma County.

"We wanted to elevate all Sonoma brands," said Caroline Shaw, executive vice president at Jackson Family Wines and a member of the board of directors at Sonoma County Vintners, one of Vinexpo Explorer's partners.

Organizers also wanted to show Sonoma County as a thriving community in spite of the deadly wildfires in October 2017.

"Everybody worked together last fall," said Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, told the buyers Monday. "We were able to get the grapes picked and the wine made. The wine is every bit as good as it has ever has been."

Buyers tasted wines on a Monday at a global tasting at the trade show in Santa Rosa. Buyers and wineries were paired to discuss possible contracts. Buyers and wineries gave Vinexpo their criteria; Vinexpo then matched the parties and set business meetings for Tuesday morning.

"It's like speed dating," Shaw said.

Rick Tigner, CEO Jackson Family Wines, played a key role in bringing Vinexpo Explorer to Sonoma this year. The event chose Austria for 2017.

Tigner is a member of the board of directors at Vinexpo and at Wine Institute, a sponsor of the event which started Sunday and ends Tuesday.

"I really think as you travel around the world, people don't know enough about Sonoma County," said Tigner. "So I'm hoping that they really embrace what Sonoma County is all about."

Vinexpo selected the buyers who traveled to Sonoma all expenses paid. Wineries participating in the tasting were among the trade show's sponsors.

Guarachi Wine Partners of Woodland Hills was among the wineries who took part in Monday's global tasting. The winery wants to export wine as it plans to boost production. Guarachi Wine Partners produces 2,500 cases per vintage.

"This is our first effort in export," vice president of marketing Travis Arnesen said as buyers milled about.

Price Family Vineyards and Estates, which produces Three Sticks, wants to expand its export business, said Chris Mattson, sales, Price Family Vineyards and Estates. The winery, which produces about 5,000 cases a year, exports to countries such as Switzerland, Denmark and Belgium. "We want to diversify," Mattson said. Most of its sales are via direct-to-consumer channels. "The wholesale market is challenging because of consolidation," Mattson added. "I would like to secure a few new markets. I'm very interested in Asia and Scandinavia," he said.

Rodney Strong Wine Estates exports to Canada and other countries, including Mexico, Denmark and the United Kingdom. "We're hoping to find some markets we're not in," said Daniel Wildermuth, vice president, global marketing.

The biggest challenge is finding a well-capitalized importer, Wildermuth said. The number one target is the China market.

The company stopped exporting wine to China because it was not getting paid on time, Wildermuth said. Having Vinexpo helps.

"It gives us the opportunity to meet importers from other countries," Wildermuth said. "It also brings a lot of – hopefully - publicity to Sonoma County as a winegrowing region."

Representatives for Kunde, a division of Vintage Wine Estates, said they want to expand their winery's export business and further existing relationships in key markets outside the United States.

"In our business, whether it's domestic or international, it is so much about the relationships," said Katie Long, brand advocate at Vintage Wine Estates.

Mike Gilboy, senior vice president sales and marketing at Vintage Wine Estates, said Vinexpo is also an opportunity to tell the story about Sonoma. "Everybody talks about Napa. But you know there is Sonoma," Gilboy said.

Buyers open to trying Sonoma wines.

Anastasia Dewi Mawekere, a buyer for PT Dimatique International in Jakarta, Indonesia, said her company carries no Sonoma wines in its portfolio. "It's a nice opportunity to learn more about Sonoma," she said.

François Gignac, of Divin Paradis in Quebec, Canada, came to Sonoma to find new partners. The wines he buys are sold at Quebec's SAQ stores. He does not buy from boutique wineries because of their small productions. Yet on Monday, he contacted SAQ to ask if the Crown corporation would be interested in wines from Ernest Vineyards, a small winery in Windsor. The wines, Gignac said in French, are fantastic.

"They are so good I had to do something," he said in French.

Aishwarya Nair, of Mumbai, India, a wine buyer and sommelier at The Leela Hotels, enjoyed wines too. But she and others noted the taxes and fees that make US imports expensive.

Linsey Gallagher, vice president, international marketing at Wine Institute, said US wine exports totaled \$1.5 billion in 2017, a 70-percent growth over 10 years.

On Sunday, vintner Jean-Charles Boisset welcomed the group at Buena Vista, California's first commercial winery dating from 1857. An actor playing founder, "Count" Agoston Haraszthy, aka Mr. George Webber, led a tour of the winery.

Boisset spoke about his love for America which he discovered as a child.

A native of Burgundy, Boisset urged buyers to keep an open mind about Sonoma.

"Please be open minded. Please be crazy. Sign orders," Boisset before leading the group into singing a Burgundian wine song for a second time that evening.