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Foreign wine buyers flock to Sonoma County trade show

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(3 of 4) Jean-Charles Boisset, left, talks with Celine Calbrix, from France, about his wines during the Vinexpo Explorer event in Santa Rosa on Tuesday, September 25, 2018. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

Sonoma County vintners took big strides this week to raise their profile as a global wine purveyor.

Foreign buyers came to their backyard and came away impressed with what they tasted. Vinexpo, a trade show for wine and spirits professionals, hosted its latest conference Sunday through Tuesday at various locales across the county. Previous stops have included Bordeaux and Tokyo.

More than 60 wine buyers — representing everything from a French restaurant to a Hong Kong casino to a Vietnamese import business — attended tastings, educational sessions, and winery tours and dinners to learn more about the area's wine and its 18 distinct grape-growing regions.

Foreign buyers interviewed said that they didn't have a great deal of knowledge about Sonoma County wines beforehand, especially compared with Napa Valley.

Celine Calbrix, a buyer for a French supermarket chain, said she was surprised by the quality of the pinot noir and chardonnay she sampled, which was much better than she had perceived. "The wines are very elegant. It was a surprise for me," Calbrix said.

On Tuesday morning, buyers assembled at the Hyatt Regency Sonoma Wine Country in Santa Rosa for so-called "speed dating" meetings with more than 60 local wineries. During the 25-minute sessions, vintners were looking to close the deal with the buyers.

"Now we have created a session where you actually do business and move the needle. They are signing the contracts and selling the wine," said Michael Haney, executive director for the Sonoma County Vintners trade group.

The conference provides a better sales opportunity because wineries can show, not tell the buyer what makes Sonoma County wines so special, Haney said.

"When I have a group here, we got them. All they need to do is meet the people, see the sights, see the fog this morning," Haney said. "Once we get someone here, the county and the people sell themselves."

Florent Barrere, who owns a wine import business in France, called the local wines that he tasted "very fresh and elegant," singling out specifically pinot noir, chardonnay and zinfandel. "I am amazed by the variety, the different styles of wine," Barrere said.

Foreign sales are a small, but increasing segment for most premium wineries in California. In 2017, U.S. wine exports decreased 5.5 percent in value and 7.9 percent in volume, according to the Wine Institute, the state's top wine industry trade group. The European Union and Canada are the two top markets for California wineries.

Even with tough competition across the globe, Sonoma County's reputation is growing internationally, said Jean-Charles Boisset, the French-born owner of Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma and DeLoach Vineyards in Santa Rosa.

"I think we have made significant progress over the last 10 years," said Boisset, who under his ownership has boosted his exports business from three to 30 countries.

"I think it's a great evolution," he said.