

## Hitting generational wine beats

*Every generation wants something slightly different from their bottle of wine.*

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Grandpa may still be jamming out to the Beatles (Napa Cab), but Gen X wants to blast Pearl Jam (Loire Pinot), while Millennials and Gen Z are Taylor Swift one minute, K-Pop the next (Sancerre, then a bottle swig of "California" Pet-Nat).

Different generations have fermented in dissimilar cocktails of cultural references, political landscapes and broad socio-economic trends. Is it any wonder that they want very different things from wine?

While wine sales enjoyed a steep upward trajectory for decades, the decline in the past several years means that making great wine and putting it on the market is no longer nearly enough to not just maintain a profit, but to stay in business.

"There's no question the industry is going through a moment of recalibration, but from our perspective, this is just a correction," says **Samantha Silva**, estate manager at Calistoga's **Larkmead Vineyards**. "Consumers are asking more thoughtful questions about value, authenticity, and relevance, and that's healthy."

Across the board, **Silva** says, there is a desire for experiences with wine that "feel meaningful rather than transactional." Ready to get real? Here's what to know about how each generation thinks about and defines what's meaningful to them.

### The culture of wine

Your idea of a good time at a winery may have more to do with your age than your personality. For Boomers and to a lesser extent Gen Xers, simply enjoying a glass of wine with a sunset is often enough, says Steve Sangiocomo, a third-generation partner at Sonoma's Sangiocomo Family Vineyards.

"But for Millennials and Gen Z, we're finding that having trivia nights, or partnering with local chefs and bakers on food pop-ups, wellness or yoga events in the vines, that's what draws people in," Sangiocomo says. "We are also family friendly. We have an area where kids can run around and enjoy themselves, and that allows young families, including some of our friends in the area, to come in, feel welcomed and relax."

For younger generations, Silva points out, wine is no longer an "everyday default." "It's something more celebratory and meaningful, and that shift places an even greater emphasis on the importance of storytelling, hospitality and relevance," **Silva** says.

Explaining the people behind the label, what they do, and why, is increasingly important for hooking the young 'uns. Michelle Kaufman, vice president of communications at Willamette Valley's Stoller Wine Group says that younger consumers respond to "values-aligned storytelling."

"They want to understand who is behind the brand, how the land is cared for and whether the company's actions align with their personal beliefs," Stoller says. "Sustainable farming, environmental responsibility, family ownership, community partnerships and philanthropy all resonate, but only when communicated clearly and authentically."

Anna Campbell, owner and creative director at Elk Cove Vineyards concurs, explaining that living their values from grape to glass is one of the few ways to stand out now.

"There were only six wineries in Oregon when we started in 1974, but today there are 900 or so Oregon wineries, so it's important for us to lead with our values and tell our story to get discovered," she says. "We also know that younger generations especially – Millennials and younger – care more about third party environmental certifications and they expect businesses to live up to their stated values."

At Elk Cove, that means pursuing certifications, so their values are visible: they are members of 1 Percent for the Planet, and they're on their way to B Corp certification.

### **Grape varieties, spending levels**

How different generations engage with wine at home, and the grapes they specifically seek out, diverges as well, with some overarching trends across the board.

"We are for sure seeing changes in style of wine away from heavy, high-alcohol, oak reds, toward lighter and more aromatic wines," says Campbell. "I interpret this change as more about what people are ordering when they go out – wine is no longer just served alongside steak-house fare or heavy sauces."

Instead, diners may be opting to pair lighter and brighter reds and whites with tacos, salad or curry, Campbell points out.

"Younger generations want to try different varieties," says Sangiacomo, discussing his family's brand, which built itself on farming and bottling primarily Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. "We planted Chenin Blanc, Riesling and Albarino in 2021, and we're finding that younger people love them."

**Larkmead**, which, rose to fame with a portfolio anchored in Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux varietals, has found that expanding to Chenin Blanc, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel, Aglianico and other grapes in its Research Block, has sparked serious interest among Millennial and Gen Z patrons. "We remain a Cabernet-driven estate, but our Research Block Series has introduced new points of access for younger and more exploratory consumers," **Silva** says.

Michael Baldacci, director of winegrowing and vineyards at Baldacci Family Vineyards in the Stags Leap District of Napa, notes that in addition to seeking out varietal diversity, younger generations want wines they can drink now (and often cost a little less).

"Boomers and Gen Z tend to value consistency, trust in the brand and classic varieties," Baldacci says. "They appreciate depth, cellar-worthiness and knowledgeable service. They often gravitate toward

structured Cabernets and established labels. Millennials prioritize flexibility and experience. They're open to blends, lesser known varieties, and wines meant to be enjoyed now."

### **Health and wellness**

Clearly, almost everyone is drinking a little less wine than they used to – at least sometimes. Dr Liz Thach, MW, analyzed an online sample of 1500 (305 of whom drink wine rarely or never, but enjoy other alcohol categories regularly) consumers for a Wine Market Council study, to find out why.

"Gen Z is more concerned than any other generation about health and wellness," Thach says. "They seem to be focused on the calories, carbs, sugar and potential additives found in wine. Gen X and Boomers are more concerned about cancer risks."

That echoes what Baldacci sees in the tasting room. "Younger consumers are especially focused on what's not in the bottle: additives, sugar and chemicals," Baldacci says.

Interestingly, Thach points out that only 20 percent of Baby Boomers mentioned mental health when discussing concerns about alcohol, while 37 percent of those ages 21 to 34 are concerned.

### **Marketing 101**

"Gen Z and Millennials are extremely concerned about what they put in their bodies, and how employees are treated," Thack says. "They are willing to pay more for brands whose values align with their own. Boomers typically see wine as a pleasure that goes with life and food. Gen X is somewhere in the middle. They are more concerned about organics and environmental responsibility."

To boost transparency, meet younger drinkers where they are while not turning off older generations, Thach recommends putting ingredients on the label, and specifically noting that no sugar is added. "Most Americans think sugar is added to wine, which just isn't true," Thach says. "That is low-hanging fruit."

While wineries clearly need to communicate more efficiently across generations, they don't necessarily need to reinvent the wheel. At Stoller, Kaufman has found that one extraordinarily old-fashioned mode of communication is delivering serious ROI.

"We continue to rely on foundational channels like email, social media and digital advertising, but one of the most effective tools across generations has been a return to physical mail," Kaufman says.

"Thoughtfully designed invitations, tangible offers and 'present this card' promotions have driven strong event RSVPs and engagement across age groups."

In a digital age, the personal touch, delivered with intention and care, can evoke an emotional response that is translated into loyalty and even better, cash-money.