

American Wine in London



I recently spent two weeks in London, editing V&WM from afar and exploring the city in my off hours. I made a point to pop into a few wine shops and wine-friendly retail outlets while I was there, to check out the American wine offerings.

On the U.S. side of the pond, wine industry types often wonder why California wines aren't more popular in the U.K. market. The answer I've heard from my U.K. sources over the years is that the really interesting wines (particularly at the mid-level price-points) just don't make it to England – and I saw for myself that this is often the case.

The Tesco supermarket chain, the U.K.'s largest wine seller, carries Diageo's value brand Blossom Hill and some lower-end Gallo stuff, but I found little else of interest among the California wine offerings.

I was pleasantly surprised to find Cupé, Seghesio and Shafer wines at the Majestic wine merchant just down the road from my temporary digs, but at around £30 per bottle (\$45 U.S.), the wines were not cheap (in the price-conscious U.K. market, anything over £5 is considered steep). Surrounding the store's tiny California section – placed near the back of the shop – were high-quality, interesting wines from France, Spain and the like, priced at less than one-third the cost of the California bottles. (Guess what I drank during my time in England?)

During my stay I paid a visit to the offices of Decanter magazine, where one of the editors had this to say about California wine: The magazine rarely features California on its cover, because it doesn't sell issues. And most of the interesting California wines aren't available in

the U.K., so why frustrate readers by writing about them?

At another meeting, the editor of a respected U.K. wine trade magazine told me that he's interested in covering California, but he practically has to beat story ideas out of the local California wine promoters.

The good news for American vintners beyond California is that wines from the Northwest and elsewhere were well represented in London. At the high-end department store Selfridges (which has an amazing food hall with a wine shop), Northwest wines practically outnumbered the selections from California. And the wine department at the incredible Whole Foods store on Kensington High Street featured an entire section of Virginia wines – more than I've seen in any U.S. wine shop. U.K. wine drinkers apparently prefer the more reserved European style of wine to the richer style that many California wineries produce.

That's not to say that California should just give up on the U.K. There are lots of California vintners making distinctive, balanced wines with moderate alcohol, and if they can handle the fees for shipping, taxes, importers, etc., they would likely find an interested public in the U.K. – that is, if the selling price is right.

Salute!

Comments? Please email us at feedback@vwm-online.com.

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