

The Big Reach

WHEN THE AMERICAN WINE SOCIETY SPEAKS, PRODUCERS LISTEN

story and photos by Fred Minnick



At the 2010 American Wine Society convention in Cincinnati, members tasted a variety of Mercer wines from Washington State.

You may have never heard of the American Wine Society or had them at your establishment for a tasting. But they are changing the way winemakers sell to the American consumer and are as knowledgeable as most winemakers.

Just ask David Forsyth, winemaker at Mercer Estates in Washington State's Yakima Valley. During his tasting of Mercer whites at the American Wine Society (AWS) conference in November, a member raised his hand and wanted to know whether Forsyth used sulfites. "At any American Wine Society event, there are a number of winemakers in the crowd. They are extremely knowledgeable," Forsyth says.

In fact, many American Wine Society members are certified wine judges, make wine themselves or are reputable wine educators. "We train people to be serious wine judges," says Willis Parker, President of the organization. "We teach people how to truly appreciate wine. You really get an appreciation for what a winemaker is going through when you're trying to make a five-gallon batch."

The conference promoted the Bordeaux and Bordeaux Supérieur AOCs, which represent 55 percent of all the Bordeaux wines consumed in the world.



The Eyes of Bordeaux

The American Wine Society has more than 4,000 members, who spend upwards of \$30 million a year on wine. That's why the likes of Planet Bordeaux sponsored the organization's 2010 conference and has strongly targeted this group to promote the Bordeaux and Bordeaux Supérieur AOCs, which represent 55 percent of all the Bordeaux wines consumed in the world.

"These people are our ambassadors," says Xavier Milhade, owner of Château Recougne and Château Montcabrier. "They understand our price and quality."

Jana Kravitz of Planet Bordeaux says the American Wine Society is a strategic partner in the effort to reacquaint American consumers with Bordeaux. "The value for the money is unbeatable, but Bordeaux remains complicated and scary," Kravitz says. "[American consumers] think they can only have it if it's expensive. We are bringing the fact that Bordeaux is valuable and affordable. The American Wine Society is a great audience of consumers; it is made for consumers and is very important to our strategy."

Times Have Changed

One reason the American Wine Society is so appealing to winemakers is the ongoing distribution and retail consolidation, says Jim Bernau of Willamette Valley Vineyards, who spoke at the 2010 conference. "It's getting harder to reach consumers through normal channels because of consolidation. There used to be distributors serving as evangelists, but those days are gone now," Bernau says. "Small retailers are being crowded out by large retailers, where the person making buying decisions may live in a different state."

For these reasons, Bernau believes, reaching consumers through the American Wine Society has never been more valuable. In Massachusetts several years ago, he reached out to the Chesapeake Chapter of the AWS before a tasting. One guy told his friends, who told *his* friends, who told *his* friends, etc. The whole chapter—and then some—showed up to the tasting. Now, Willamette Valley Vineyards is one of the bestselling wines in the area.

"Consumers are making more of a personal identification with producers



Jana Kravitz of Planet Bordeaux, the organization that sponsored the 2010 conference.

and are working very hard to minimize the economic impact of middlemen," he says.

And that's where the American Wine Society has made perhaps the biggest impact. It is introducing the likes of Willamette Valley Vineyards, Mercer, Bordeaux wines and many others to savvy wine consumers. Members travel the world in packs, hitting every vineyard possible, bringing home more

cases than most retailers receive from the producers.

It's this enthusiasm, this lightening in the bottle that Charles Krug Winery is hoping to capture in 2011. Parker says the famous Napa Valley producer has agreed to participate in the conference. "Things are definitely looking up for us," Parker says.

And, apparently, for the American Wine Society sponsors. ■■