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ON WINE

Why It's Worth Knowing Who Imported Your Wine

Looking to try an unfamiliar wine—with the reassurance that you're getting a quality bottle? Check the back label for the name of the importer. Here are a few you can trust to offer wines of character



ROCK THE BOAT Looking to venture into new territory in the wines you choose? Go with a trusted importer and explore the unfamiliar with an assurance of quality. **ILLUSTRATION: ALESSANDRO GOTTARDO**

By Lettie Teague

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IF I'M BROWSING for wine in a retail shop and chance upon an unfamiliar one, I'll turn the bottle around and check the back label for the name of the importer. That name may be writ

small or large, depending on the importer's ego and/or typeface selection. Either way, it can be a useful indicator of the character, quality and even style of the wine.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Does the importer's name on the back label influence your buying decision? Join the conversation below.

Certain importers, such as Neal Rosenthal and Kermit Lynch, became famous decades ago thanks to their consistently well chosen, high-quality, interesting portfolios of wines. (See "The Old Guard," below, for more about them.) They also inspired a new generation of professionals who have put together their own portfolios of characterful wines. I'm happy to see the name of

any of the following companies when I check a back label. I know the wine will be an interesting one—and I'm that much more likely to try it out.

Bowler Wine

David Bowler worked for other wine companies before launching his own Manhattan-based wine-importing company in 2003, and his success was far from sudden. "It takes some time to develop a reputation for quality," he said. Mr. Bowler began by importing wines from France—Burgundy in particular, a region close to his heart and also to the birthplace of his wife.

Domaine Chandon de Briailles in Beaune was one of the first properties in his portfolio. "I've always liked to find wines that are under the radar," he said. "Chandon de Briailles had several strikes against it—a red-wine producer in a white-wine region, an old-style producer off the beaten track—but also high quality."

Over time he's extended his selection to wines from other countries, including Germany, Austria and Spain, and his wines are distributed across the U.S. But his standards remain the same. "I think everyone can tell an honest wine from something manufactured," he said. "It shows in the glass."

Zev Rovine Selections

Though Brooklyn-based Zev Rovine has put together one of the most extensive natural-wine portfolios in the country, when he founded his wine import company in 2008 he knew very little about natural wine. "My philosophy aligned with it but I didn't know it was a distinct movement," said Mr. Rovine. He developed a deeper appreciation and knowledge of the wines by frequenting the wine bars of Paris.

Mr. Rovine ran a wine bar of his own in Park City, Utah, before founding his company. He started with three producers in different regions in France. All the producers in his current portfolio are certified biodynamic or organic. Mr. Rovine only represents small producers "dedicated to working the land."

Though French wines dominate his portfolio, Mr. Rovine has expanded into Central Europe. And he recently traveled to Japan, where he found a few natural sake producers whose wines he will begin importing soon. Zev Rovine Selections wines can be found in 28 states, but he doesn't aspire to grow overly large. "We're big in the natural wine world but we're still pretty small in the regular world," he said.

Little Peacock Imports

Putting together an all-Australian portfolio might appear quixotic given the long decline in Australian wine sales in this country. Yet Gordon Little did just that when he founded Little Peacock in 2011.

Eight years ago Mr. Little had five producers and 226 cases of wine to sell. Today he's up to 20 wineries and 13,000 cases per year, and his wines are distributed in 15 states. He did briefly entertain the idea of importing a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc—"It would have been a smart commercial move," he said—but he decided to stay true to his vision for the company.

Today Mr. Little finds wine merchants and sommeliers open to Australian wine, but they want something unusual—not just Shiraz—so he's always scouting new wines. Recently he's found interesting options in Orange, a cool-climate, high-altitude region in New South Wales, and Margaret River. Though the latter is home to big-name wineries like Vasse Felix and Cape Mentelle, he's focused on Ashbrook Estate, a high-quality, family-owned operation that epitomizes what Mr. Little is looking for: underrated wines that reflect the character of a region and "over-deliver for the price."

Soilair Selection

When Enrico Battisti founded his New York-based wine import company in 2005, he came up with the name SoilAir to honor two key factors in the cultivation of healthy grapes: soil and air. His wife loved the name immediately, said Mr. Battisti. She also tastes many of the wines he considers importing—a one-woman focus group. Both Battistis clearly have taste, since Mr. Battisti now represents some of the top winemaking talent in Italy, including Roberto Voerzio in Piedmont and Schiopetto in his native Friuli region.

Some of the first wines Mr. Battisti imported were from Friuli, and later he expanded his portfolio to include bottles from virtually every region in Italy as well as wines from Spain, France, Portugal, Austria, Germany, Argentina and the U.S. He looks for wines that taste of a place and a grape. "If it's made from Nebbiolo it should taste like Nebbiolo, not Cabernet," he said.

Mr. Battisti's entry into the market was well-timed, he said, as consumers were turning away from commercial wines and toward the sort of artisanal producers he represents. He's

interested in adding more wines from Portugal and Spain, to retail in the \$15-20 range. He hopes to add a new producer each month, an ambitious objective. But Mr. Battisti believes, "In order to grow, you need to grow fast."

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THE OLD GUARD / IMPORTERS OF LONG STANDING STILL WORTH

SEEKING OUT

Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant : Mr. Lynch founded his company in Berkeley, Calif., in 1972. He's imported a veritable Who's Who of great French winemakers: Hubert de Montille, Bernard Michelot, Jean-Marie Ponsot, François & Antoine Jobard and Domaine Tempier.

Rosenthal Wine Merchant: Neal Rosenthal founded his New York import company in 1980, a couple of years after opening his retail store, with great French and Italian winemakers, including De Forville, Brovia, Hubert Lignier, Vincent Bitouzet and Gaston Barthod.

Terry Theise Estate Selections: In 1985, when Terry Theise founded his Boston-based import company, he focused on a few German winemakers. Over the years his portfolio has expanded to become the definitive selection of German and Austrian wines and grower Champagne.

Louis/Dressner Selections: Denyse Louis and the late Joe Dressner started their New York-based company in 1988 with a handful of French producers. Now run by Ms. Louis, Kevin McKenna and Jules Dressner, this importer is a top source of natural, organic and biodynamic wines.

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