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Helping You Know Your Bordeaux

By ERIC PFANNER

PARIS — Many people dread the moment the sommelier steps over to their table. A Bordeaux? A Burgundy? A Brunello? Or a big embarrassment in front of a group of friends or colleagues?

A new Web site set up by the promotional body for the Bordeaux wine region of France will allow wine drinkers to get a little practice the night before, in the privacy of their own homes. On the site, people can post questions to a panel of sommeliers, who answer via video chats.

The site, www.enjoybordeaux.com, is part of a €2 million, or \$3 million, campaign by the Conseil Interprofessionnel du Vin de Bordeaux that is aimed at lifting sales of the region's wines in the United States, where they have fallen sharply during the [recession](#). The campaign aims to introduce casual drinkers to wines priced at less than \$35.

“Our biggest challenge is to persuade people that it's an affordable wine,” said Arthur Ceria, the creative director at CreativeFeed, an online marketing agency that developed the campaign. “Social sippers in America have kind of an old perception of Bordeaux. They think it is expensive, hard to pronounce, hard to be educated on and only for special occasions.”

With its decorous chateaus, often depicted on the label, and complex hierarchies of quality, Bordeaux wine can indeed seem a bit stuffy. To try to overturn such perceptions, CreativeFeed, which has offices in New York and San Francisco, created a largely digital campaign aimed at appealing to younger consumers.

In addition to the Web chats, these include video ads in New York City taxis that use geographical positioning technology to show passengers the closest shops that sell Bordeaux wines.

The Bordeaux promotional board has also struck a partnership with Snooth.com, a social media site that allows consumers to score and review individual wines and helps users find them. Under the agreement, reviews and recommendations from Snooth about Bordeaux wines under \$35 are being fed to the Bordeaux site.

Wine drinkers have embraced sites like Snooth, cellartracker.com and vinogusto.com in recent years, allowing ordinary fans to match spits with high-profile critics like Robert M. Parker Jr.

“We have been watching with great interest how the Internet is changing the world of wine, and the wine press,” said Pascal Loridon, marketing director of the Bordeaux wine body.

Because many people turn to the Internet before buying a bottle of wine, he said, a visible presence in these forums can translate into increased sales.

Elsewhere, a few wine producers have embraced the Web to considerable effect. Stormhoek, a South African winery, introduced its wines in the United States by sending cases to dinner parties where the hosts agreed to blog about them.

But the French wine business is highly fragmented, with thousands of small producers accounting for the majority of its output. Few of them have the financial means to mount elaborate marketing campaigns. In their domestic market, French vigneronns have also faced tough legal restrictions on their ability to promote their wines online.

In the United States, French winemakers have been hurt by a weak dollar and the economic crisis. Volume exports of Bordeaux fell 26 percent in the 12 months through August, Mr. Loridon said. In terms of value, they fell 34 percent.

The plunge followed several years of recovery after the previous big decline, which coincided with anti-French sentiment in the United States during the buildup to the war in Iraq, which France opposed.

The United States remains an important market for Bordeaux — second to Britain in the value of exports, and fourth after Britain, Belgium and Germany in volume. Overall wine consumption in the United States has been on an upward trend in recent years, unlike in France and many other European markets, according to wine trade groups.

Faced with a glut of wine, even in famed regions like Bordeaux, the [European Union](#) has been taking steps to try to cut production and to increase exports. As part of that effort, it is financing half of the Bordeaux promotion in the United States.

While the campaign features some billboards, it will not include any magazine, newspaper or television ads, Mr. Ceria said, because the goal was to appeal to younger adults.

“We believe the next generation is what’s important, and we want to be where they are,” he said.

In one of the online chats last week, a visitor to the site asked one of the sommeliers, Mollie Battenhouse, to compare Bordeaux to wines from the Napa Valley of California. She gave a six-minute explanation of similarities and differences in grape varieties, climate and winemaking styles.

The format encourages people to ask wine-related questions that they might be afraid to broach at the dinner table, Mr. Ceria said.

“It’s about approachability, about not being afraid of mispronouncing a Bordeaux, without peer pressure,” he said.

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