



Bill Daley

What do women want?

The wine industry is fighting for their attention, but will it work?

Published January 18, 2006

Say bonjour to Lulu B. With a glass of wine raised in salute, she is the classic stereotype of la fille Francaise, with her low-cut shirt, tight, knee-skimming skirt and beret topping her kinky brunette 'do. Where her feet went is anybody's guess, but she perches confidently on her cafe chair nonetheless.

Veuve Clicquot she ain't. But then Lulu B. is not supposed to be. Unlike the plucky young widow Clicquot, who kept her husband's Champagne business alive and managed to cater to all sides during the Napoleonic wars, Lulu B. is a work of fiction, a label name and a cartoon character created by a French wine company to, in the words of promotional materials, "appeal to women in a more lighthearted, approachable way."

Whether American women will utter "bienvenue" ("welcome") or snub Lulu B.'s chardonnay, syrah and pinot noir remains to be seen.

What isn't in doubt is the growing presence and clout of women in the wine marketplace.

Women make up 52 percent of the population but now make 55 percent of the country's wine purchases, according to the 2005 edition of the Adams Wine Handbook, published by the Adams Beverage Group.

A number of Chicago area wine merchants report a similar trend.

At Sam's Wines & Spirits, Chicago's largest wine store, the number of women customers has increased over the last five years. Wine director Todd Hess estimated 60 percent of customers are now women.

So vital has the female customer become that at Schaefer's in Skokie they try to hire a woman for every man hired, said Sterling Pratt, the store's wine director. And while the numbers may not exactly be one-to-one, gender equity is important to him.

"Women relate better. They listen, which is a trait my wife has to teach me," he said.

The wine industry is certainly working to attract women. Whether its advances are being accepted is another story. How else to explain the introduction of wines like Rainier Wine's "Mad Housewife" line with its Lucy-esque photo of a woman on the label, or the O'Brien Family Vineyard's "Seduction" sold in an organza gift bag, or "White Lie" by Beringer Blass, a wine touted as both women-made and low in alcohol and calories.

What are most women who drink wine looking for?

The Wine Institute, a California wine trade group based in San Francisco, reports that women are less influenced by the ratings of experts.

"Although the wine quality is important to women, so are the label design, the bottle shape and the philosophy of the winery," the institute said.

Add good value, say a number of Chicago wine experts, both male and female. Women also are looking for wines that work with what they're serving for dinner and wines that please their guests as well as themselves.

Chicago Tribune

"Women think about wine in context more than men, I suspect," said Marti Barletta, chief executive officer and founder of The TrendSight Group, a Winnetka-based consulting firm specializing in marketing strategies for women.

Barletta said women tend to drink more whites and roses while men drink more red wine. "I think, in general, a woman's preferred flavor profile is a little more soft," she said, adding that women are more willing to try something new while men find something they like and stick to it.

Don Sheil of Binny's Downtown said "Pinot noir is a hot category for everyone, but women especially inquire about and buy a lot of this varietal."

Tracy Lewis Liang, director of wine and spirits at Treasure Island Foods, said the wine business can be roughly broken down by gender. The collectors into the pricy bottles are largely men while women buy the majority of wines meant for dinners, entertaining and holiday meals.

It is for this later group, the women, that wineries have been creating new lines, Liang said. She's clearly not sold.

"It seems to me, and I've been presented with Lulu B. and all that stuff, it's a little bit pandering," Liang said. "Those aren't the sort of wines that elevate anyone's wine experience."

"I think for all wine drinkers, the goal would be to go to that second level where it's not just a brand they recognize but learning a little bit about the wine's origins."

Christine Blumer, president of Winediva Enterprises, a Chicago wine consulting company, thinks winemakers have moved beyond "putting flowers on the label because chicks will dig it." But making lower-alcohol wines, like White Lie, isn't catering to Blumer's needs, either.

"Of all the things people are looking for, it's not lower alcohol," she said, laughing. "I wonder if their research was limited to a small circle of women friends all from California."

Hess said that he thinks much of the industry's efforts toward women reveal the "usual condescension." But he is willing to cut Lulu B. some slack, largely because the brand is owned by the Boisset family of France. He's very impressed at how the family's brands have been recharged by Jean-Charles Boisset, president of Boisset America and vice-president of the French parent company, Boisset Vins & Spiritueux.

Lulu B. is sold in 15 states and Boisset hopes to introduce it into 10 more markets during the first quarter of 2006.

"We created this line to speak more to a female consumer," said Boisset, noting the pitch goes beyond price to the wine's style.

"It's softer and a little more lingering in the finish than a traditional Rhone wine, which can be masculine and robust," he said, noting that Lulu B. was developed by a team of female wine experts including his own sister.

"We're really talking about the woman's world," he said. "It's more about the approachability, it's more about food and wine pairing on a regular basis."
