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Younger Wine Buyers Turn From Napa

Retailers say newer consumers are choosing Paso Robles and other California regions for similar styles at lower prices.

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Retailers and distributors say newer wine consumers are looking beyond Napa and Sonoma as California's wine business faces slower sales and an older customer base, with regions such as Paso Robles gaining ground because they can offer similar styles at lower prices.

The shift is showing up most clearly in the fine-wine segment, where Napa and Sonoma still carry strong name recognition but are no longer the automatic first choice for many younger drinkers. Cindy Leonard, executive vice president and general manager of the fine wine division at Southern Glazer's, said newer customers still respect those regions for quality and familiar labels, but often approach wine with a more exploratory mindset. Rather than buying by region alone, she said, they are more likely to look for an experience or a style that fits what they want to drink now.

Ole Thompson, commercial manager at Cherry Hill Wine & Spirits, a boutique distributor in Seattle, said Napa and Sonoma remain aspirational, but not always an everyday purchase for newer consumers. He said younger buyers still recognize both regions as benchmarks because of their visibility in restaurants and retail stores, but they are less attached to the names themselves and more willing to try other California areas that deliver comparable wines at lower prices.

Retailers say price is a major factor, but not the only one. Nick Pascale, general manager of Pascale’s Liquors in Liverpool, N.Y., said his store has seen strong interest in wines from Paso Robles, especially when shoppers are looking for Cabernet Sauvignon in the $30-$60 range. He said true Napa Cabernet can be hard to source consistently at those prices, while Paso Robles often offers a similar style and better value. Pascale said the $40-$60 California Cabernet category has been weaker than expected at his store, with sales tending to fall below that range or move up to higher-priced Napa bottles.

Pascale also said many consumers now question whether Napa Valley Cabernet justifies its price. In his view, some wines from the region have become expensive relative to what they deliver in the glass. He said shoppers who are learning about wine more seriously often find it worthwhile to look beyond Napa and compare other regions and price points.

Ryan Oehmsen, co-owner and director of wine and spirits at White Horse Wine & Spirits in New Jersey, said Napa still resonates with experienced wine drinkers, but it has not connected with younger consumers in the same way. He recalled when Napa wines were far less expensive on retail shelves and said today’s prices make them feel more like special-occasion purchases for many new buyers. Oehmsen said affordable wines from Paso Robles appear to be driving much of the market now because their flavor profiles match what younger consumers are seeking.

Chuck Wagner, owner of Caymus Vineyards, said Napa may matter less to this new consumer than it did to earlier generations. He said buyers want something they can afford, enjoy and share with friends, even if it comes from outside the best-known California regions.