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Younger consumers are driving growth in wines priced above $50

A Wine Market Council study found buyers under 60 were nearly twice as likely as those 60 and older to say they were buying more

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Younger consumers are taking a larger role in the market for wines priced at $50 or more, while older buyers are showing signs of pulling back, according to new research released Tuesday, Nov. 17, by the Wine Market Council.

The group’s first phase of a luxury wine consumer study found that buyers under 60 were more likely than older consumers to say they were increasing purchases of higher-priced wine, even though they generally had less wealth. The results add to

signs that some long-held assumptions about who buys luxury wine are shifting, a change that could influence how producers, retailers and restaurants choose assortments and try to attract customers in the broader beverage business.

The research was presented during a Nov. 11 webinar by Michelle Egan, the Wine Market Council's president, and Christian Miller, the group's director of research, along with John Gillespie, founder and chief executive of Wine Opinions. The study was conducted by the Wine Market Council with Wine Opinions.

Researchers surveyed 1,401 people, and 714 qualified as at least occasional buyers of wine priced above $50. Because the Wine Opinions panel tends to skew older, the study also added an online oversample of more than 500 consumers, about 80% of them under 40. To reduce overstatement, respondents had to identify their most recent purchase of a $50-plus wine and name their favorite wine in that price range. Wine Opinions also conducted 15 one-on-one interviews.

Among qualified buyers ages 21 to 39, 17% said they were buying more wine at $50 and above than they were two to three years earlier. That was nearly double the rate among buyers 60 and older. For consumers ages 40 to 59, the figure was 16%. By contrast, only 9% of respondents 60 and older said they planned to increase spending on wines priced at $50 or more.

At the same time, about one-third of respondents across all age groups said they expected to spend less on wines at that price level this year. The study suggests that many of those consumers are not leaving wine entirely, but moving down to a lower tier. Fully 89% of respondents said they buy wine priced at $25 to $49 at least every two to three months.

The study also found that the luxury wine buyer base is more spread across age groups than some in the industry may assume. Of the qualified buyers, 29% were ages 21 to 39, 31% were ages 40 to 59, and 40% were 60 or older. The second phase of the study, scheduled for release in December, is expected to estimate the size of those segments more precisely.

Gender differences stood out more sharply than age differences. Women accounted for 58% of buyers ages 21 to 39 and 55% of buyers ages 40 to 59. Among buyers 60 and older, 68% were men.

Income and wealth, however, remain uneven across generations. Half of respondents ages 21 to 39 reported household net worth below $100,000, compared with 7% of respondents 60 and older. Gillespie said many younger buyers appear to be couples combining incomes to purchase bottles in the $50 to $80 range at least occasionally.

How consumers use these bottles after buying them may be the clearest dividing line in the study. Younger buyers were much more likely to open expensive bottles soon rather than store them. Among respondents ages 21 to 39, 21% said they open a bottle priced above $100 at least once a week. Among those 60 and older, that figure was 3%.

That pattern suggests a different kind of luxury buyer than the collector-focused image that has shaped parts of the high-end wine market for years. Younger consumers in the study were less likely to build cellars, less likely to hold deep inventories at home and less likely to treat expensive wine as something to save for the long term. The interviews pointed to several possible reasons, including lower incomes, smaller homes, renting instead of owning, moving more often and a simple preference for drinking wine now rather than aging it.

Younger buyers also showed weaker ties to wine clubs. Among respondents ages 21 to 39, 43% said they had never joined a wine club, and only 18% belonged to more than one. Among buyers 60 and older, 41% belonged to more than one club. Lower club participation may mean younger consumers are less tied to specific wineries and more willing to shop across brands and regions.

That appears to be happening already. Miller said younger consumers are less dependent on California and more open to buying from a wider set of wine regions, a pattern he said has also appeared in other Wine Market Council surveys. For producers and sellers, that may point to an opportunity as traditional ideas about the luxury buyer evolve. Merchandising that assumes premium wine shoppers are older, collection-minded and focused mainly on California may miss part of the current market.

The study also found that younger buyers are willing to pay more, but they expect more in return. In interviews conducted by Wine Opinions, consumers said a higher price could attract attention, but it also raised expectations for quality. Buyers said they felt more confident when a recommendation came from a trusted retailer or sommelier who understood their tastes, when they had done their own research or when they had visited a winery themselves.

The next phase of the research, due in December, is expected to examine which attributes matter most to luxury wine consumers and to group buyers into personas, offering a closer look at how the high-end wine market is changing.