vinetur

Wine Industry Leaders Warn of Fragmented Messaging as Consumer Preferences Shift

Napa Valley symposium highlights urgent need for innovation and unity to keep American wine relevant amid economic pressures.

Thursday, November 13, 2025


Financial
SYMPOSIUM

At the recent Wine Industry Financial Symposium, held in Napa Valley, industry leaders and financial experts gathered to discuss the current state of the wine business and its future. The event, now in its second day, brought together executives, economists, and stakeholders to address the challenges facing the wine sector and to explore strategies for adaptation and growth.

Gary Mortensen, president of Stoller Wine Group, opened the morning session by addressing what he called “The Correction”—a period marked by shifting consumer preferences, economic pressures, and a need for innovation. Mortensen emphasized that change is one of the few certainties in both business and life. He urged attendees to see this moment not as a crisis but as an opportunity to rebuild and rethink their approach.

Mortensen pointed out that the wine industry has often limited itself by focusing too narrowly on tradition. “When we only trap ourselves into thinking we’re in the wine business, then we’re only in the wine business,” he said. He encouraged producers to look beyond their own sector for inspiration, suggesting that lessons from other industries could help modernize wine’s image and appeal.

The symposium’s discussions reflected a consensus that the industry must adapt to survive. Oliver Colvin, chairman of WX Brands, spoke with Carol Reber, chairman of Far Niente Wine Estates, about how difficult times can lead to lasting improvements. “You remember the challenging times, and you learn from them; you don’t really learn from successes,” Colvin said.

One recurring theme was the need for a unified voice within the American wine industry. Mortensen noted that while there have been attempts to bring producers together under a common message—similar to successful campaigns like “Got Milk?” for dairy or Nike’s “Just Do It”—no single narrative has emerged for wine. He described the current state as fragmented, with no national grounding voice to represent all producers.

Reber echoed these concerns, saying that wine has become too serious and exclusive in its messaging. She suggested that adding more fun and joy could help attract new consumers. “We ho-hummed the hell out of ourselves and made everything so

precious,” she said. Both Reber and Mortensen agreed that innovation in marketing and hospitality is essential if wine is to remain relevant.

Mortensen also acknowledged that many consumers find wine intimidating or unapproachable. He admitted that even successful companies like Stoller are “still not very good at making wine user-friendly.” This perception has led some people to view wine as outdated or elitist compared to other alcoholic beverages.

Other sessions during the symposium addressed broader financial trends affecting the industry. Carol Collison of Global Wine Partners led a panel on mergers and acquisitions with Tony Correia of The Correia Company and Adam Beak of Vertical Head Wine and Beverage Group. They discussed how consolidation is shaping the market and what it means for smaller producers.

Dr. Christopher Thornberg, founder of Beacon Economics, provided an update on macroeconomic trends impacting wine sales and production. He highlighted factors such as inflation, changing consumer spending habits, and global supply chain disruptions.

Throughout the day, speakers returned to the idea that survival depends on adaptability. The consensus among participants was clear: while recent years have been difficult for American wine producers, those who embrace change and work toward a unified message will be better positioned for future success. The symposium concluded with calls for greater collaboration across regions and sectors to ensure that American wine remains competitive in a rapidly evolving marketplace.