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Young Wine Drinkers Seek Bottles That Reflect Their Values Over Prestige Labels

Sommeliers across the U.S. report rising demand for sustainable, affordable wines as new generations prioritize ethics and transparency.

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In restaurants across the United States, sommeliers are fielding a new set of questions from diners, reflecting shifting priorities among wine drinkers. Younger generations, in particular, are less interested in traditional regions like Burgundy and more focused on how their wine is made, who makes it, and whether it aligns with their values.

At Aria Restaurant in Atlanta, sommelier Remy Loet says guests often ask for alternatives to classic bottles that have become too expensive. “People want the same feeling and experience as Champagne or Napa Cabernet, but at a different price point,” Loet explains. Rising production costs, tariffs, and supply chain issues have pushed prices up, making some favorites out of reach for many. Loet often recommends sparkling wines from Germany as a substitute for Champagne, offering a similar style at a lower cost.

The question of value is not limited to Atlanta. In New York City, Torrey Grant, wine director at Leonetta NYC, says diners are looking for the best examples of a region or style without breaking the bank. “Our wine program includes 70 bottles under $100,” Grant notes. “It shows people are willing to explore but also need value.” He points out that while wineries set prices, consumers determine what they consider valuable.

In San Francisco, Jeremiah Morehouse, master sommelier at Spruce, hears questions about the so-called California wine glut and whether younger generations are drinking less wine. “There’s growing curiosity about what the wine glut means for quality and value,” Morehouse says. He also notes that climate change is a frequent concern among guests.

Amy Racine, beverage director and partner at JF Restaurants in New York City, observes that more diners want to know about sustainability and the people behind the bottle. “It’s less about certifications and more about intent,” Racine says. “People want to understand the story and ethics behind what they’re drinking.” She adds that guests are more open than ever to trying new regions and styles if they trust the recommendation.

Barbie Messa, general manager at Maison Brondeau in White Plains, New York, says the most common question she gets is simply: “Is it good?” Messa believes this reflects broader changes in the wine world. With fewer Gen Z drinkers entering the category,

many consumers may be less familiar with specific styles or characteristics and instead focus on overall quality. Messa holds a Ph.D. in cognitive psychology and sees this as part of a larger trend toward uncertainty and distrust in many areas of life.

At Mulberry Street Tavern in Des Moines' Surety Hotel, sommelier Andrae Steed has noticed guests are increasingly interested in organic farming practices, low intervention winemaking, indigenous grape varieties, and minimal sulfur use. Even if they don't have all the technical language yet, Steed says there's clear awareness and curiosity about these topics.

In more casual settings like Vino Volo at Atlanta Airport, general manager Eric Green reports that many travelers admit they don't drink much wine or find it too bitter. Green uses tasting flights to introduce newcomers to approachable styles like Chenin Blanc or New World Pinot Noir. He also notes a significant increase in questions about the carbon footprint of wines. The menu now includes icons indicating which wines are biodynamic, sustainable or certified organic.

Zach Pace, owner of Volta Wine + Market in Saint Petersburg, Florida, has seen interest shift from so-called "ultra-natural" wines to organic but well-made options. He believes Gen Z is driving this change by seeking meaningful experiences over flashy labels or big-name regions.

Across all types of establishments—from fine dining to airport lounges—sommeliers agree that today's guests want more than just good taste from their wine. They want to know that it was produced responsibly and reflects values they care about. Many are less concerned with sounding knowledgeable or choosing the "right" bottle; instead they seek honest recommendations tailored to their preferences.

This new approach means sommeliers spend less time discussing terroir or technical details and more time talking about farming practices and producer philosophies. For many modern wine drinkers, knowing who made the wine—and how—is just as important as where it comes from.