



Three local wine companies bring the focus back to the family-run properties that make quality wine. (Essdras M. Suarez/Globe Staff)

## They herd it through the grapevine

The Boston Globe

### Three companies helm a local movement back to distributing boutique wines

By Stephen Meuse, Globe Correspondent | October 4, 2006

Few casual wine drinkers know anything about the industry that delivers their bottle of chardonnay, or care to. But there's one trend that threatens to diminish the variety and quality of wines consumers have access to.

The distribution industry responsible for getting wine onto retail shelves is rapidly consolidating into the hands of a very few, very big players. These big corporations don't have time or interest in small-scale winemaking, since it's much more efficient for them to flog a handful of heavily marketed brands (think Yellow Tail or Red Bicycleette) than represent a few hundred relatively obscure, family-run properties. The situation threatens to shut small producers right out of the market, leaving consumers with less choice and limited access to some of the world's most quality-oriented wines.

It's a trend ripe for a countertrend, which is coming now in the form of a national movement back to boutique wine distribution. Three newly established local companies are in the thick of it. Finding their names on a label -- Genuine Wine Selections of Medfield, managed by Dennis Quinn; Vineyard Research of Lunenburg, started by David Raines; and Charles River Wine Company of Sturbridge, headed by Peter Sagansky -- is a virtual guarantee of quality, whatever the price.

Retailers who carry their products know it. At Wollaston Wine & Spirits, wine buyer John Sano says that 50 percent of the fine wines in his shop come from the kinds of small producers these companies represent. "That's where the quality and value is. Without these guys, where would I ever get a great Sancerre or a real pinot grigio?" Sano sees evidence that consumers are beginning to catch on to the fact that the name of the importer or distributor on the back label can be an important tip-off to quality.

But getting set up to import and distribute wine isn't simple, and it's no surprise that all three companies are owned or run by industry insiders.

Quinn, the sales manager at two-year-old Genuine Wine Selections, and owners Matt and Jackie Carroll had to first navigate a maze of local and federal rules. Licenses to import wine are issued by the federal government, while the Commonwealth's Alcohol Beverages Control Commission does permitting for wholesalers.

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Genuine doesn't presently hold an import permit, so the company works with specialty importers who source the wine where it's made. Right now, the majority of Genuine's portfolio consists of wines brought in by Peter Weygandt of Pennsylvania, an importer who specializes in artisanal producers. The fledgling company was fortunate to get Weygandt on board. "At the time we were getting started," says Quinn, "Peter wasn't being represented in Massachusetts, and we thought this was a real opportunity for us to jump-start things. He took a chance on us."

Because value is so important, Quinn isn't offering any California wines at the moment -- prices are too high there. "It's gotten rare to find a California wine that can compete with European wine at the price, even with the run up in the

value of the euro," says Quinn, 46. "In France you can still find small-producer, estate-grown chardonnay that can retail for \$12. There's no way to find anything comparable to that in California."

Another company with a focus on Europe -- Vineyard Research -- was launched in 2004 by Raines, who has a dozen years of experience in the retail end of the business. Raines, 53, concentrates mainly on hillside properties in France and Germany, and his approach to choosing the properties he represents is somewhat unconventional.

He starts with winemakers who have already established solid reputations in their own regions. "We're not looking for modern wines, but we're not looking for old-fashioned wines either," says the entrepreneur. "Our growers tend to be people who already have a strong local customer base and sell most of their wine directly to the public."

Raines's curious tag line for his company is "post-industrial wine imports." It's the kind of wine made by growers who take full advantage of new technologies to improve hygiene and promote fruit ripeness, but who reject others as unnecessary interventions.

The most robust portfolio of the three is Sagansky's Charles River Wine Company. Sagansky also has the longest track record among the group, having worked decades ago at Classic Wine Imports, a pioneer in the direct import business. He founded Wineworks (later called Central Distributing) in 1989 and sold it a decade later. At \$3 million in annual sales, Charles River Wine is more than three times the size of either Genuine or Vineyard Research. As principal buyer, Sagansky has a sharply defined focus. "Our point of differentiation is our attention to small, family-owned wineries where the fruit that goes into the wines they make comes from vineyards they own and maintain."

But there are pragmatic considerations, too. Sagansky knows that the style of wine he prefers isn't always what a customer wants. "I occasionally need to remind myself that for most wine drinkers their introduction to New World pinot noir will come via California cabernet -- not through grand cru Burgundy," he says.

The boutique approach to distribution may be good business for entrepreneurs, for the small estates they represent, and for consumers, who get more choice and quality, but it's also good for the morale of the people who work in the system.

Charles River salesman Carl Thelander, who left a large distributor to work with Sagansky, has watched as consolidation in his industry left quality properties scrambling for a place in the distribution chain and squeezed salespeople hard to meet quotas on heavily marketed brands. Thelander remembers when there were lots of companies with knowledgeable wine people selling labels they could speak about with familiarity. Now most of those who remain have been forced to operate more like liquor companies.

"I was doing fine at my last job," Thelander says, "but now I'm back to doing what I got into the wine business to do - taking wines by producers I believe in to customers I care about." ■