

Katherine Cole

‘Since the pandemic, many of us have developed subscription fatigue’



Decades ago, a San Francisco friend mentioned that a mutual acquaintance had joined a ‘club’ in Napa Valley. But not a club for playing tennis, or for discussing books. ‘She can go anytime, for private tastings,’ my friend said, impressed. As a 20-something, I had never heard of such a thing. The phrase ‘wine club’ conjured an adult life I hadn’t yet earned, requiring some blend of sophistication and success. Membership implied belonging and privilege.

Wine clubs were just taking off then, inspired by the allocation-list model. But while true allocation lists help blue-chip producers manage overwhelming demand, today nearly every US winery touts an ‘exclusive club’ to move available inventory. To drive sign-ups, wineries tease customers with the promise of ‘access to rare releases’.

I don’t blame them: US alcohol shipping and wholesale laws are labyrinthine, vary by state and cost small wineries dearly. Selling directly to consumers makes business sense. But when every winery employs the language of scarcity, that language starts to sound deceptive.

Wine lovers who belong to multiple clubs complain about the sameness of it all: the templated emails, the regularly scheduled shipments, the annual pick-up party with charcuterie and a commemorative glass. And since the pandemic, many of us have developed subscription fatigue. ‘Set it and forget it’ deliveries of wine feel less special when your ‘exclusive allocation’ arrives with the same cadence as your dog’s kibble.

How can wineries improve the club experience? ‘Engagement is number one,’ advises Jim Kuhner, founder of California winery consultancy Coferment. Engagement isn’t a euphemism for beaming sales messages into the void; it’s a two-way conversation that makes members feel heard. ‘Nowadays it is harder than ever to rely purely on high scores to drive sales,’ Kuhner says. ‘You have to get out there and meet the people,’ whether digitally or face-to-face.

Consumers want to be on the inside. We crave a sense of belonging. Once the experience starts to feel transactional, the magic dissipates, no matter

how famous the name on the label. Building community is the hardest part of the wine business. It’s also the most rewarding aspect of wine culture.

The Wine Atlas Collective is a new coalition of eight independently operated wineries building a nationwide community by offering reciprocal benefits across state lines, much like sibling ski resorts and multi-museum passes. ‘The idea was to get as much geographic coverage as we could,’ explains co-founder Janie Brooks Heuck. Members of any of the wineries enjoy discounts and tasting privileges at all the others, in eight different regions.

In Oregon’s Willamette Valley, Brooks Heuck and her team at Brooks Winery have also created a more welcoming and social club experience. Members can bring their own bottles to social ‘mixers’ and mingle without pressure to purchase; non-alcoholic wine flights invite non-drinkers to participate fully.

In addition, a less onerous membership option, Brooks with Benefits, feels less like being

trapped in a relentless calendar and more like a standing invitation. Rather than a regular shipment, it requires a modest quarterly spend that can be applied to wine, tastings or experiences. Thanks to these initiatives, Brooks Winery’s club membership numbers are growing during an industry downturn.

Some of Europe’s most recognised producers, including Domaine Leflaive and Marchesi Antinori, are now rolling out membership models that look a lot like American clubs. It’s an exciting development given that the European wine system lacks a strong cellar door, direct-to-consumer culture, with sales traditionally moving through merchants.

But with the term ‘wine club’ losing its lustre on this side of the pond, I have some unsolicited advice for our European friends: anyone can ship ‘rare’ wines on a schedule, but wineries that create closely connected communities of enthusiasts are rare indeed, and their clubs will prosper. **D**

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‘Consumers want to be on the inside’

IN MY GLASS THIS MONTH

Recently, a small group of family and friends gathered to toast the memory of my father, a lifelong oenophile. Our shared magnum of **Château Lynch-Bages, Pauillac 1989** was savoury and composed, a classic Bordeaux at just 12.5% alcohol; it complemented our French bistro dinner rather than stealing the show. It reminded me that if wine is a social adhesive, a magnum shared at the table is the strongest kind.



PHOTOGRAPH: SHE SAW THINGS