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Boutique wines: How to find and acquire them

By [Dave McIntyre](#), Published: March 11

When I wrote about [San Francisco Chronicle wine editor Jon Bonné and his new book, "The New California Wine,"](#) I lamented that the wineries Bonné extolled tended to be small, with limited production and even more limited availability. Even before that Feb. 5 column appeared, I began hearing hints that

those and similar wines, although elusive and difficult to find, might yet be attainable by those willing to make the effort and pay the price to seek them out. It seemed as though I was being introduced to a clandestine supply network of boutique wines. "Psst, buddy: I know where you can get the good stuff!"

Larger distributors (and with market consolidation, distributors get fewer and larger) tend to avoid small wineries that don't produce enough wine to reach their markets. Small producers shy away from larger distributors because they don't want to get lost among the more familiar names in the distributors' extensive portfolios. Those producers look for other outlets, such as direct-to-consumer sales or small distributors that cater to niche but highly interested markets.

Here are two efforts working around the traditional three-tier distribution system for alcoholic beverages — nothing illegal, of course.

My first "dealer" was John Grimsley, co-founder of [Free Run Wine Merchants](#). Grimsley and his business partner, John Paul Cheski, founded the Richmond distribution company in 2008 to focus on boutique wineries in California, Oregon and Washington. They also import from several wineries, mostly in Italy. They built their portfolio in part through introductions by their winemaker clients: "I know who's making some good stuff."

"They know we are looking for higher acid, freshness, low oak, balanced, complex wines," Grimsley says.

Their clients include Headhunter Wine, in Berkeley, Calif., a project of Virginia natives Brian and Sarah Grzybowski. Headhunter makes only two wines, producing a total of 126 cases — what Grimsley calls a "nano-winery." its 2012 albariño from Paso Robles is a lovely debut vintage.

Knez Winery produces stellar chardonnay and pinot noir from Mendocino County's Anderson Valley, an established region that seems to have hit a high-quality growth spurt in recent vintages. Farther up the coast,



Arterberry Maresh headlines Free Run's Oregon portfolio, and Thurston Wolfe leads the pack for Washington. Refreshingly, Grimsley and Cheski don't chase only the higher-end wines headed for restaurants; they also look for good-value wines that fit their preferred style, though limited distribution means you might have to do some searching to find them at retail.

My second introduction was to Aaron Epstein of [Le Metro. Wine. Underground](#). Behind the complicated punctuation, the name of Epstein's venture suggests hidden wines moving beneath the surface of what we see day to day on retail shelves. Le Metro is a subscription wine club with selections chosen according to a monthly theme. Subscribers receive six wines for \$175 on a monthly or quarterly schedule, along with descriptions written by Epstein and an infographic designed by Elaine Chukan Brown, herself a wine luminary as author of the popular [Hawk Wakawaka wine blog](#). (District and Virginia residents may subscribe. Maryland does not allow retailers to ship to its residents.)

Most wine clubs offer a specific winery's bottlings or reduced inventory that can be sold at a discount. Epstein is aiming a bit higher, to give consumers access to interesting wines that might easily be missed even if they made it onto crowded retail shelves.

"There's so much wine and so much information out there that it's mind-numbing," he says. "How do you get normal wine drinkers to try something new without the noise and intimidation?"

Epstein, a New Yorker, is now based in San Diego. His first wine industry job was with a large distributor, where he realized he was never interacting with consumers, the people who would ultimately drink the product he was trying to sell. The obvious alternative would be to find a job in retail, but he chose direct-to-consumer sales as a way to introduce wine lovers to small-production boutique wines from around the world.

Le Metro's first collection in June 2013 was "California Underground," featuring new-style, small-production California wines. Epstein has moved around the world since then, but he returned home for this month's "California Soil, Italian Soul," a collection of California wines made from traditional Italian grape varieties. It includes two vermentinos from Ryme Cellars, one made as an "orange" wine fermented on its skins; a slyly seductive dolcetto by Idlewild Wines; a beautifully, savory aglianico from Giornata; and a sangiovese-based Super Tuscan-style blend from Bacio Divino Cellars. Epstein walks us up and down the Italian boot while never leaving the California coast.

He could have done that in a retail store somewhere, relying on distributors like Free Run Wine Merchants to fill his shelves. But he was looking for a national audience.

"Many of us in the trade have the dream of owning a little boutique shop where you can meet your customers every day," Epstein says. "But not everybody lives in the ideal market. If people in New York have trouble finding these wines, think how the people in Ohio feel."

McIntyre blogs at dmwineline.com. On Twitter: [@dmwine](https://twitter.com/dmwine).

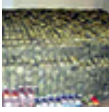
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