

Wine Clubs

This week's Wine of the Week topic was proposed by none other than our very own Hillary Howard. She has decided to expand her palate and has asked me to research a few of the better wine clubs to help her on her wine journey.

There are a lot of wine clubs available to consumers today. However, wine, as my wife is fond of saying, is like a purse; it is a matter of personal taste. There are many different styles to choose from, including clubs that specialize in small family operated wineries, sparkling wines, wines from specific states or regions, and even wines that are made without the use of chemicals or preservatives. Lastly, just about every winery on the planet offers their own wine club where members can snag first offering or wines made exclusively for the list.

With so many choices, finding the right wine club to join is definitely a matter of personal taste. In addition to all of the variables, the fundamental question is, do they really offer a good deal on wines you're buying?

If you are new to wine or want to just expand your palate, joining a wine club may be a viable option. Most clubs are an excellent way for consumers with little or no time to trek to their local wine shops to experiment with different varietals and styles. Best of all, the wines come to you – although you would be wise to research your local laws and regulations. Some states do not allow out of state wine shipments and can impose stiff penalties (and no wine).

However, it is important to note that nothing beats having a great relationship with your local wine shop since they get a chance to get to know you and your palate and make recommendations that may be more in your proverbial ballpark.

Many wineries have their own proprietary wine clubs – just try getting out of any tasting room without getting “the pitch” - but you're limited to the wines of just that specific winery's offerings. However, at the opposite end of the spectrum, expanding into the vast milieu of online wine clubs, the choices can seem almost endless.

One of the best resources I have found is the WineClubReviews website (www.wineclubreviews.net) which breaks down and rates many of the online offers in a way that helps you figure out which club might best fit your budget and your tongue. Even though the site receives remuneration from the clubs that are posted on the site, it is still a valuable resource for categorizing and narrowing down your search for the perfect wine club.

One major advantage to joining a wine club membership is the access to small-production wines that may otherwise escape your notice since many are not readily available in our marketplace. In addition, there is a theory that since clubs are buying in bulk, they can offer the wines at a lower price than your local retailer, although personally, I have not found this to be the “case” – particularly when buying cases. To me, the biggest advantage of giving a wine club membership is the thrill of being remembered each time new wine shows up in the mail.

Here is a brief rundown on some of the more popular wine clubs, as culled from the Wine Club Review website:

Gold Medal Wine Club <http://goldmedalwineclub.com/> — They offer a range of ‘series’ featuring themes such as medal winning wines from smaller California wineries or Best in Class Pinot Noir wines.

Lot 18 <http://www.lot18.com/> - This club offers daily specials on premium wines, a nice fit for a collector who's looking to stock a cellar.

Club W <http://www.clubw.com/> — You'll take a palate profile survey which helps the Club W team curate a special box of wines suited to your particular tastes. This club also focuses on value wines and offers nice touches (which most others offer as well) such as the ability to cancel or skip a shipment and return any wines you don't like.

California Wine Club, Premier series <http://www.cawineclub.com> - Not only do they start with great California wines, but their prices are very competitive and they offer additional discounts after shipments have gone out.

Honorable Mentions:

Plonk Wine Club <http://www.plonkwineclub.com/> - focuses on wines under \$20 that are, according to the website, “artisanal, obscure and affordable.”

Uncorked Ventures <http://www.uncorkedventures.com> — Specializing in California, Washington and Oregon wines, primarily hard-to-find smaller wineries with limited distribution.

Wine of the Month Club <http://www.wineofthemonthclub.com> — America's oldest wine club (circa 1976) with an emphasis on value wines. A great entry-level experience for new wine drinkers.