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HOW YOUR WINE LIST STACKS UP

There's a mind-boggling array of qualitative information available about wines full-service operators could add to their wine lists. But a little quantitative information—accurate numbers about which wines sell and which ones don't—might help you hone in on what bottles customers really want to buy. No one's giving this valuable data away for free, of course. But it is available, and we're guessing that you could more than make back its cost in a week.

We hold no brief for Fairfield, CT-based Winemetrics, a company which aggregates data from more than 10,000 restaurant wine lists and compiles it into a series of reports aimed at wine suppliers, marketers and distributors as much as at restaurant operators. But this company is sitting on a ton of information that could help restaurant operators make more money, so we feel RH newsletter readers should at least know it's out there if they're interested.

Here's one item that caught our eye. We see in Winemetrics data that restaurant operators collectively include more Cabernet Sauvignon (16.2 percent of all listings) on their wine lists than Chardonnay (14.9 percent), *even though Chardonnay outsells Cabernet Sauvignon by two to one*. If you ever get the feeling that you're sinking more money into the slower-moving part of your wine inventory than you are in the fast-sellers, you may be right.

Another number that popped out: Among red wine varieties, Pinot Noir holds the No. 2 share on wine lists (9.6 percent), even though Merlot (with a 9.0 percent of listings) outsells Pinot by 80 percent!

Are these good numbers to know when drawing up a wine list? We think so.

Here's a third: Of the more than one million wine listings Winemetrics looked at, 65 percent were for red table wine, 28 percent for white table wine (sparkling wines accounted for six percent, rosé for one). "This is not to say that consumption is that one-sided," the report says. "Many red placements are "library" wines that are featured as much to enhance the prestige of an account as to earn revenue." Those big-ticket reds do provide prestige, but how much prestige can your afford?

Here's the Winemetrics sales pitch from c.e.o. Charles Gill:

“Wine brands are built on-premise, but no distribution information was available when I was a marketing director. I had to make decisions based on instinct, not insight. Data was incomplete or inaccurate, and didn’t reveal competitive standings. I created On-Premise Wine Distribution Report to give brand owners, marketing executives and restaurateurs a very affordable, national report card that delivers the insight they need: competitive brand position and brand performance on a national level.”

That’s right, this information is mostly aimed at the people who sell wine to you. Nevertheless, the method Winemetrics used to compile it produced results that speak directly to the restaurant operator’s needs.

The findings represent data from 10,500 wine-oriented fine-dining and casual restaurants, located in 20 states. Twenty-four of the top 30 metro markets were included in the sample. There is a 70-30 split between casual and fine dining restaurants in the data, but the majority of the listings come from fine-dining restaurants. That’s because the average casual dining restaurant has 43 items on its wine list, while the typical fine dining operation offers 194. For wine sellers and distributors, rankings are organized by brand, origin, region and variety with the top 25 to 50 brands and products listed in each category. From there, the rankings are distilled into a “Top 100” list that delineates the most popular on-premise wine brands in the U.S. In addition, you also get to know the national average price per bottle of these top brands.

Do you need this information if you’ve got a top-notch wine consultant or sommelier in your employ? Probably not, although it wouldn’t hurt. But if you function as your own wine expert, the Winemetrics data would give you a good shot at knowing which of the mainstream brands you might want to carry on your wine list and, just as importantly, how you should price them to be competitive with other restaurants.

This information alone won’t produce a distinctive wine list for your operation. You’ll need to spice your list up to give it a personality that matches that of your operation. One way would be to add some of the gems Chicago’s Beverage Testing Institute discover and write up in Restaurant Hospitality from time to time. (The next such list appears in our November 2007 issue). But the Winemetrics information would at least help you address the profitability and popularity aspects of your wine list, and that might well make it worth the \$299 price of admission. You can check it out for yourself and download a sneak preview at www.winemetrics.com

Again, we’re not endorsing this service. But it does seem that it could be a helpful tool to have in hand the next time you write your wine list.