

# The Wine Line: When In Doubt, Just Turn Around

BY [Robert Haynes-Peterson](#), Wednesday Apr. 22, 2009

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*Wine isn't just a luxury — in our opinion, it's a necessity. But it's hard to navigate, which is why our wine expert is here to help.*

If you're like many people, you've developed a competent appreciation for wine. You can tell your merlots from your cabernets, you've visited a few wineries, you have your favorite labels, varietals and regions. When you're ready to dive into something new, one great way is to get to know your importers. The easiest way to do that? Turn the bottle over.

Somewhere on the back, by law, the label will say, "Imported by..." Why is this important? Because importers, especially the smaller ones, know their stuff. You already know your favorite vineyard cares about its product, but the importer often cares just as deeply. Sometimes they're even the driving force behind your favorite labels.

"I've spent 35 years traveling back and forth, seeing families, wineries, grape bearers," says Bobby Kacher of [Robert Kacher Selections](#). An aficionado and advocate of the wines of France (including largely unheralded regions like Gascony), Bobby is emphatic that an importer who builds strong relationships with the growers and producers will create a portfolio consumers can trust. "The kind of importers you are looking for is close to the source."

Leonardo Locascio, founder of [Winebow](#) agrees. Though Winebow's large portfolio includes impressive wines and spirits from all over the world, their specialty is Italy. Locascio has spent more than a quarter century familiarizing Americans with the depth and breadth of Barolos, Montepulciani, Brunellos, Pinot Grigios and more that Italy offers.

“Consumers benefit from the very intimate knowledge importers like Winebow have of the wine and the producers involved,” says Locascio. “Especially now in this economy and when the dollar is still weak in Europe. I’m working with children and grandchildren of vintners I met 30 years ago. In this economy, it helps. We can strike deals to ‘share the pain.’ The same is true for us in Spain and South America.”

Both Kacher and Locascio are passionate and dynamic, with strong personalities that aficionados say shine through in their wine selections. Get to know them and two or three similar importers, and you’ve instantly created access to your own personal “library” of several thousand labels.

There are, however, benefits to larger importers as well, who may have the muscle and resources to represent a truly global portfolio. “Someone buying wine may identify with an importer that has more of a worldwide reach,” Melanie Pyne, brand manager at [AV Brands](#), a division of Cordoniu of Spain. The company (both producer and importer) has an impressive portfolio of Spanish and California wines. She argues that larger companies like hers look at wine through a global lens. This may help especially as younger wine growing regions — like China and Israel — get serious about their wine. “We can provide a complete menu to almost any consumer. It’s also a powerful tool for our distributors.”

What does all this mean for you, the buyer and drinker of wine? When you find the wine you like, turn the bottle over. Find out who imports it or represents it. Visit their website and learn their specialties. Often you can meet the importers themselves at wine expos and the larger tastings. Email them, ask them questions (while I was talking with Bobby Kacher, he received an unsolicited customer email praising his portfolio).

If you find you’re enjoying the wines of a given importer, follow them around the globe. Winebow added Portuguese wines last year (after hiring a specialist from Portugal to get the ball rolling). AV Brands recently added New Zealand. If your palate and the company’s lined up in Napa Valley, odds are good you’ll enjoy wherever they’re headed next.