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Wines and the Women Who Love Them

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

HAVE marketing and gender always gone hand in hand? Consider Luna Bars, Special K cereal and Secret deodorant and you'll see that female consumers have long been targets of the ad industry's not-too-subtle advances. And then there's wine, which has recently entered the gender-charged media maelstrom at full throttle. Wine-oriented clubs, tour companies and websites now seduce women and their pocketbooks like breathless suitors. At first blush, these efforts seem completely transparent. They're just trying to sell more wine, right? But dig a little deeper and things become more complex.

Karen MacNeil, chair of the wine department at the Culinary Institute of America-Greystone, sees two sides to this recent trend.

"One side that I'm not very happy about is the implicit assumption that a wine has to be a little different or dumbed down for women to like it," she says. "On the other hand, the record number of women's conferences on wine, books on women and wine, women and wine travel clubs and excursions—all of that is really exciting because women are clearly participating on a greater level with wine, and that makes perfect sense. We're at an interesting moment of duality."

A few weeks ago I got wind of an upcoming event in San Francisco called "Wines Women Want" sponsored by the group Women for WineSense. (That's a lot of Ws.) My immediate suspicion was that this was going to be just another cheap, gender-infused advertising ploy. Then I learned more.

Women for WineSense is actually a nonprofit formed 17 years ago when a group of female wine executives banded together to counteract some negative press tarnishing the alcohol industry. Statistics on fetal alcohol syndrome, breast cancer risk and teen drinking provoked a media frenzy, and all alcohol was suddenly lumped together and collectively branded as dangerous.

"We wanted to get the moderate viewpoint out there," says Michaela Rodeno, CEO of St. Supery Winery in Napa Valley and co-founder of Women for WineSense. And they did, disseminating research on the benefits of moderate wine consumption to policy makers and the press. "It didn't take long for the public debate to develop more balance."

Their immediate battle won, the group of women stuck together and has continued to promote wine education and appreciation. On June 23, they'll showcase between 100 and 200 award-winning wines in a "grand tasting" at the Four Seasons in San Francisco. (The featured wines all earned medals in March from an all-female panel of judges at the National Women's Wine Competition in Santa Rosa.) The daylong extravaganza will also include panel discussions, food and wine pairings and educational seminars.

This event is an opportunity to enjoy wines deemed extraordinary by women professionals in the industry. Women buy more than half the wine in this country, so they have considerable consumer clout. Let's toast to this clout being taken seriously rather than exploited. Cheers.

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