



THE  
2004  
AMERICAN  
WINE WRITER SURVEY

Produced By:  
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Wark Communications  
Glen Ellen, California  
June 2004

## **ABOUT WARK COMMUNICATIONS**

Wark Communications provides public and media relations, advertising, graphic design, packaging and event management services to wine-related companies. Located in Glen Ellen California, the firm is headed up by Tom Wark and Ginny Westcott.

## **ABOUT TOM WARK**

Tom Wark has worked in wine public relations for 15 years. A native of California, he has worked with numerous domestic and international wineries, lectured on public relations and penned articles on public relations.

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Consider the wine writing genre. Is there another single food or food-related product to which an entire genre of literature is devoted? Do you find "The Tomato Column" or "cereal reviews" each Wednesday in the local paper? Where at Barnes & Noble will you find an entire section devoted to pasta or cheese education and which ones rate highest?

Yet wine is another story. What is it about wine that leads to so much interpretation? So many words. It isn't really that complicated when you back up and realize that for the most part, grapes are picked, juiced, fermented and bottled. But from this process has come an industry of some girth devoted to explaining the grape and the beverage it makes, as well as how and which one we should be drinking. America's wine writing industry is the most robust in the world, with hundreds of people regularly touching on the topic of wine or devoted to it in their writing.

The wine writer in America is also enormously influential and, in some cases, powerful. An outstanding review from certain writers or publications or a positive story about a winery in a national or regional newspaper can literally change the fortunes of wineries and people. This publicist has seen just two or three good reviews of a new wine catapult wineries to success after no more than a year making wine.

The American Wine Writer Survey is a follow up to a similar survey done in 1995. A great deal has changed in the wine industry over the past decade. This survey and report on the American wine writing community is meant to give a snapshot of the country's wine scribes as well as note the changes that have occurred since Wark Communications published its previous survey. Though the results that follow are not shocking, they are enlightening. And while more questions could have been asked, the ones that were shed light on how America's wine writers go about their business, what ideas and topics they prefer to pursue, and what type of person is likely to take up a career dedicated to writing about a beverage and the people who make it and drink it.

Tom Wark,  
June 16, 2004

## **ABOUT THE SURVEY**

Occasionally you hear complaints from one person or another that the free time or easing of work tasks that technology was supposed to bring have not materialized. You won't hear that from this writer.

To produce the American Wine Writer Survey in 1995, it was necessary to design the survey via computer using very primitive page layout software, print it, send it by mail to prospective survey takers, enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope, wait for the returned surveys to arrive by mail, carefully input each survey response into a crude database, do the data parsing with a calculator, then write the report, create crude graphs to accompany it, take the final product to a printer, then distribute the report via mail. Things have changed.

This survey was created using a survey web site called "SurveyMonkey.com". Respondents easily accessed the survey via the Internet upon being invited to take it though an email. The results were calculated automatically by SurveyMonkey.com, and included the ability to analyze results using any number of filters and factors to parse the data. And while this survey will be printed for some, it is just as easily distributed via email in a matter of seconds and for no cost. It is no coincidence that the theme of the Internet changing the way we work will appear though out this report.

Four hundred eleven (411) people were invited to participate in the survey. They were chosen for having written about wine at one time or another over the past six months. One hundred fifteen (115) responded. This 28% rate of response is considered very good. It is twice the number of writers invited to take the 1995 survey and a 48% increase over the number of responses from 1995.

The survey was conducted between May 10 and May 20, 2004. Tom Wark of Wark Communications designed the survey, chose which individuals to invite to take the survey and is responsible for its analysis.

## THE STATE OF THE WINE WRITING GENRE

Is it reflective of a complex product or an industry that makes its product overly complex that the wine writing genre in America is overwhelmingly one devoted to education? It is extraordinarily rare to find a wine book published that digs into the complex and even philosophical details of wine. For the most part, new wine books are devoted to teaching us how wine is made, what it should taste like and what foods wines should be served with.

A query of the Amazon.com books database shows 1035 books with “wine” in the title published since 2000. Some of these are reprints, some new soft cover editions of previously published works. But this is not what stands out. The message one gets from scanning the titles is the extraordinary amount of help we need understanding wine. Most books are devoted to understanding wine, presenting the best wines available, and becoming familiar with the world’s recognized wine regions. There are even books devoted to understanding the language used to understand wine. It’s a complicated product. But clearly, a number of readers are willing to investigate the subject. The world’s best selling wine writer, Hugh Johnson, with only two of his books, sold over 10 million copies.

The true wine lover gets their literary fix from wine magazines and newsletters, of which there are many. Though none of these magazines reach the magic 1 million circulation mark, they remain a vibrant source of up-to-date information and the place to go for more in depth discussion of their passion. Five magazines have remained the most important American wine publications for the past decade. They include: Quarterly Review of Wine, Wine & Spirits, Wine Enthusiast, Wine News and Wine Spectator. With the exception of Quarterly Review of wine, which focuses on prose, all these publications have wine ratings at their heart. And, they all use the 100 Point rating system. These are important publications not only for consumers but also for the wine trade. With wine reviews and ratings such a critical element of wine marketing, these publications opinions and ratings help define and create the market’s quality and sales leaders. Yet it would be a mistake to define the magazines’ importance by their ratings. Their articles also play an important part in helping the trade and sophisticated consumers understand the direction wine is taking. For example a recent article in Wine & Spirits describing the breakdown of terroir in the Russian River Valley as well as

the magazine's annual restaurant survey are two excellent examples of how these magazines contribute critical information to the market, trade and consumers.

Newsletters too are outstanding sources of detailed information. While most rate wine in one fashion or another, and while these ratings are also used by marketers to sell their wines, many newsletters also provide outstanding commentary. Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate*, *The California Grapevine*, *Connoisseurs' Guide to California Wine*, Dan Berger's *Vintage Experiences*, Stephen Tanzer's *International Wine Cellar*, *Colorado Wine News*, Ronn Wiegand's *Restaurant Wine* all fall into this category. None of these publications have huge circulation. However, The vitality and timeliness of the information make them a critical part of the genre.

Rarely read by anyone other than industry people, but perhaps the most closely read wine material, comes from the industry's trade magazines. Usually centered on technical and business information, the trade publications are the clearinghouse for the information that drives the industry.

Among the most important trade publications are *Practical Winery and Vineyard*, *Vineyard & Winery Management*, *Wines & Vines Wine Business Monthly*, and *Wine Market Report*.

The most convincing sign that wine is embedded in the American culture, or at least a product that attracts a coveted demographic, is the impressive number of newspapers that either have their own wine writer or subscribe to a syndicated wine column. This format is where American's are most likely to be exposed to wine writing. And because the audience is less sophisticated, this is where the real wine education takes place.

By far, the two most important weekly wine columns in America's daily papers are Frank Prial's New York Times wine column and the Dorothy Gaiter/John Brecher column in the Wall Street Journal. To have weekly wine columns in these large circulation newspapers is critical for exposing Americans to wine. A recent development that can't be underestimated for its importance is the San Francisco Chronicle's Wine Section. Begun in 2003, the Wine Section in the Chronicle is the first of its kind in America. On Thursdays an entire section is devoted to articles on

personalities, tasting rooms, the business of wine, wine tastings and more. While certainly an indication of the importance of the wine industry in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Chronicle's wine section has to be seen as confirmation of the cultural mainstreaming of wine.

Finally, no review of the current state of the wine writing genre would be complete without looking at wine information on the Internet. Nothing has changed the business of educating Americans on wine more than the emergence of this global communications network.

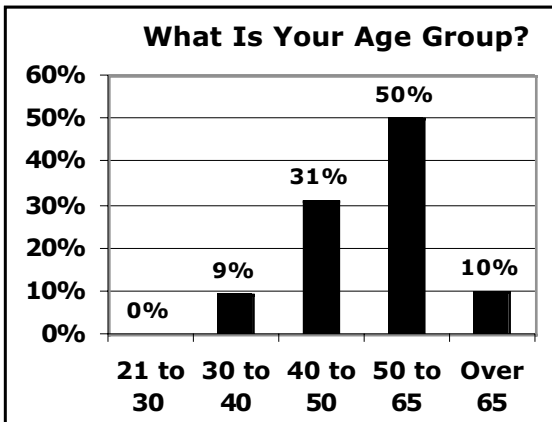
Some of the best wine writing in the world appears on the Internet. Much of this writing has previously appeared in print. However, its new accessibility is what defines the impact of the Internet.

As a distribution medium, the Internet has helped some of America's most insightful wine writers reach a dedicated audience without the expense of printing. For example, both Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences as well as Greg Walter's Pinot Report are distributed nearly exclusively by e-mail. Add to this that all the major wine publications have an Internet presence. Furthermore, with most major and even small market newspapers having an internet presence one can survey the weekly writings of American wine writers by simply moving from one newspaper web site to another on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

However, finding what you want on the Internet is still a daunting task. It is imprudent, for example, to do a "Google Search" on the word "wine". In return for your effort you will receive over 31,000,000 pages on the Internet that include this word. Nevertheless, the Internet is today the primary resource for anyone looking to survey the American wine writing genre.

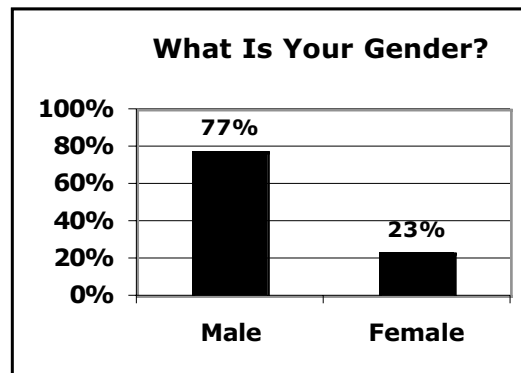
## WHO ARE THE AMERICAN WINE WRITERS?

The answer to this question is fairly straightforward: They are male and over fifty years of age. Sixty (60) percent of respondents to this survey identified themselves as over fifty years of age. But perhaps the most surprising, and unfortunate, finding was that



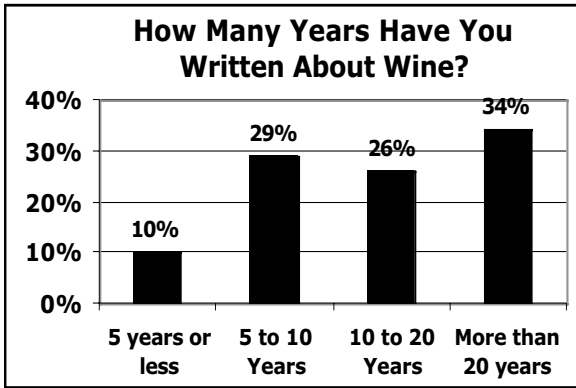
no one identified themselves as being less than 30 years of age and writing about wine. In fact, only nine (9) percent of respondents identified themselves as being 40 years old or younger. Interestingly, this contrasts with the results of this survey taken ten years ago when just over thirty (30) of respondents identified themselves as being 45 years or younger.

Is the lack of younger writers simply an accurate reflection of the wine drinking public, one in which older American's tend to be the wine drinkers? Probably. In addition, the knowledge that must be accumulated to write authoritatively on wine is not something one picks up in a college course or from occasional forays into the vineyards. Nevertheless, the near total lack of younger writers represented among wine's scribes points back to a problem the industry as a whole has yet to address: a continued lack of interest by wine marketers in attracting a younger consumer.



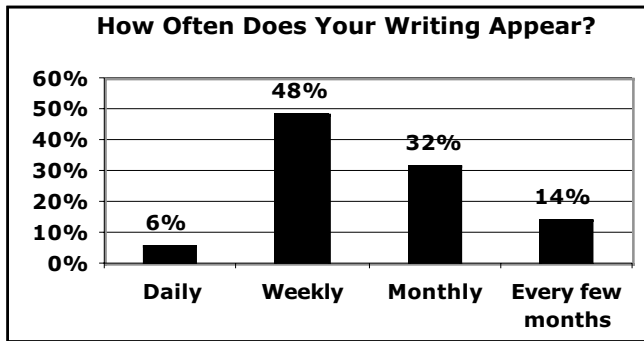
American wine writers also tend to be men. In a near identical finding with the 1995 American Wine Writer Survey, only 24% of respondents to this year's survey identified themselves as female. This finding surprises us. Just through observation it appears that far more women are taking up wine industry jobs. As well, there are a number of

prominent women wine writers including Andrea Immer, Leslie Sbrocco, Lettie Teague, Lynne Bennett, Laurie Daniel, Sandra Silfven, and Dana Nigro to name but a few.



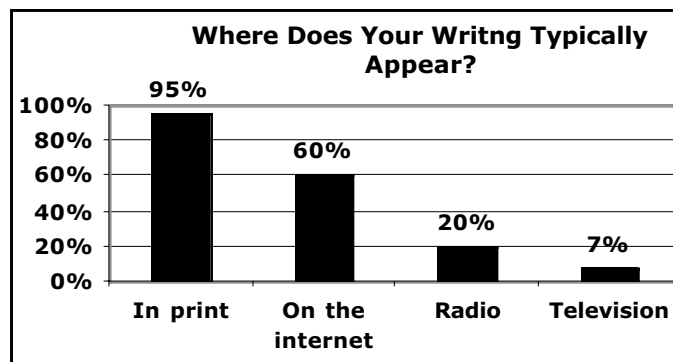
More than a third of respondents said they had been writing about wine for more than twenty years. A total of sixty (60) percent of respondents said they had been writing on wine for more than 10 years compared with 40 percent who cited ten years or less. Ten years ago 73% of respondents said they had been writing on wine for ten years or more.

### HOW & WHERE AMERICAN WINE WRITERS ARE READ



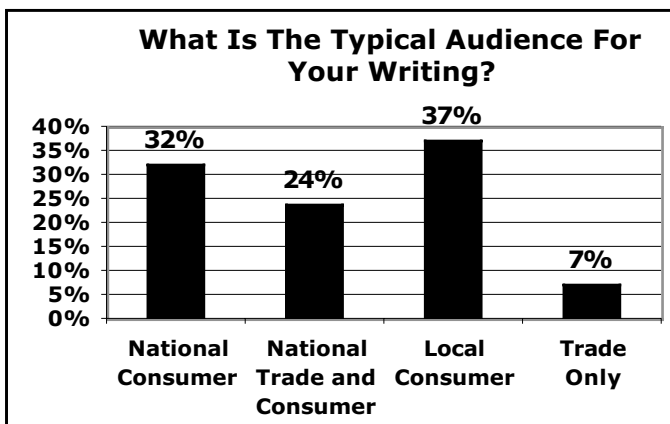
When asked to identify how often their writing appears, over fifty (50) percent of respondents said either weekly or daily. This is an encouraging finding, suggesting that there is in fact regular demand for wine prose. But where is that demand coming from?

Generally that demand is coming from consumer media. Seventy (70) percent of respondents identified either a local or national consumer audience as a typical target for their writing. One statistic to take note of is those who identified local consumers as their audience. While national writers tend to have more prestige and experience, the writer who caters to a local or regional audience provides a critical resource: those who can



inform the public what is happening in their own back yard wine-wise. This component of the wine writing trade is critical to help grow the consumer base for wine.

Finally, when asked where their words usually appear, an overwhelming ninety-five (95) of respondents said in print. Twenty (20) percent cited radio exposure and seven (7) noted their exposure on television. But the huge difference that has come over the past ten years is, again, the Internet.

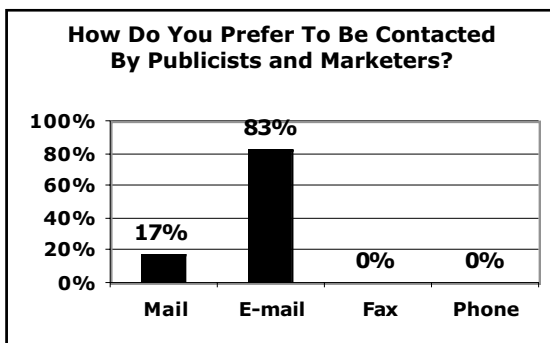


Sixty (60) percent of respondents said their words appear on the Internet.

## HOW WINE WRITERS PREFER TO WORK

Wineries employ publicists, contract with communication firms and work through numerous trade organizations in order to get the attention of the wine writer. Such is the influence of the wine media in the marketing of wine. And while the information writers obtain from these sources help them in their efforts, the sheer inundation of material and contacts is certainly one of the burdens of making a living by writing about wine.

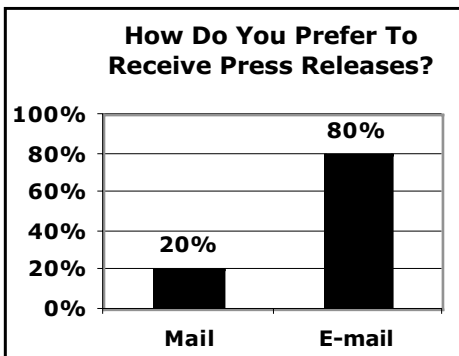
### *Communicating With The Press*



When asked how they would prefer to be contacted by marketers or publicists, eighty-three (83) percent said via e-mail. Seventeen (17) percent said by mail. However, what is most illuminating about these results is what they don't reveal: Survey takers were also given the opportunity to choose "by phone" as a method they prefer to be contacted by

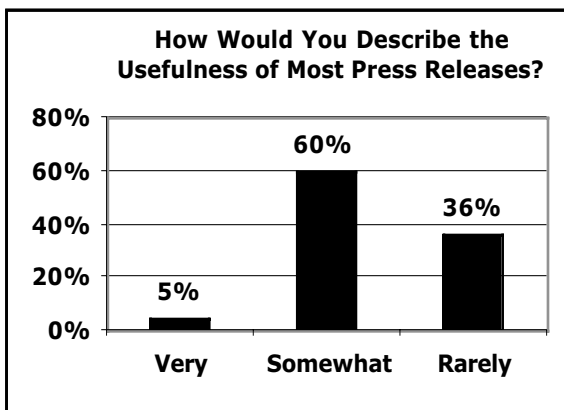
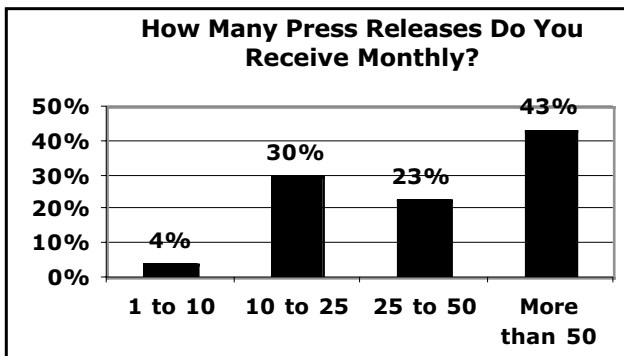
marketers and publicists. Not a single respondent (0%) said they would prefer to be contacted by phone. Is it that they are too busy opening email to take time to talk on the phone? No. The writers' reluctance to want to speak with publicists and marketers

is understood when you look at their responses to another set of questions.



Asked how they prefer to receive press releases, again eighty (80) percent said via email with twenty (20) percent saying mail. When asked how many press releases they receive monthly, forty-three (43) percent of respondents said 50 or more.

It should be noted here that this question was probably poorly constructed. There was no place for writers to say they receive 100 or more press releases per month. For the record, four (4) percent said they received only 1-10 press releases a month, thirty (30) percent said they received 10 to 25 press releases a month and twenty three (23) percent said the number was between 25 and 50 press releases per month.



How useful is the information sent to writers? The answer is not enough to make them think that anything more interesting would be learned if they talked to the release's writer rather than just receiving their emailed and mailed press releases. And this explains why zero percent said they want to be contacted via telephone.

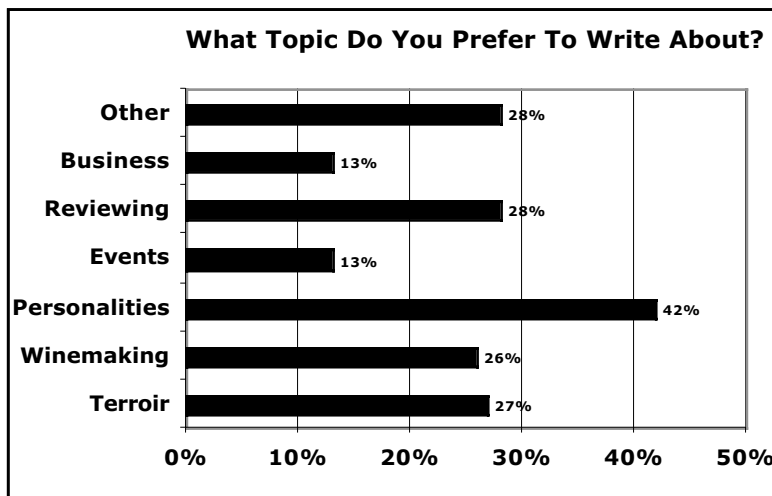
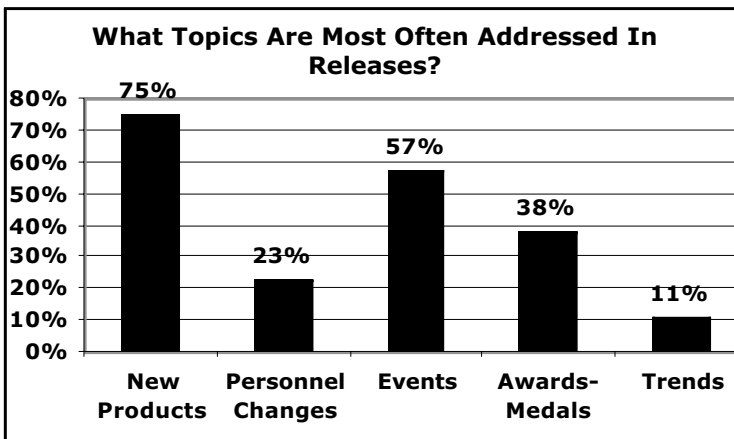
Asked to describe the usefulness of most press releases, thirty-six (36) percent of

respondents said “rarely useful.” Sixty (60) percent said “Somewhat Useful” and a pitiful five (5) percent called these press releases “very useful”. What’s changed in the ten years since this survey was first taken? In 1995 sixteen (16) percent of

respondents said press releases they received were extremely or very useful and twenty-seven (27) percent said they were “rarely useful”.

Publicists and marketers have gotten worse at gaining the interest of the media. Why?

Consider what writers tend to read about in press releases. Asked to select two topics that most often are addressed in press releases, respondents said “New Product” announcements show up seventy-five (75) percent of the time. Personnel changes are addressed twenty (23) percent of the time. Events are announced in fifty-seven (57) percent of press releases, cheering over



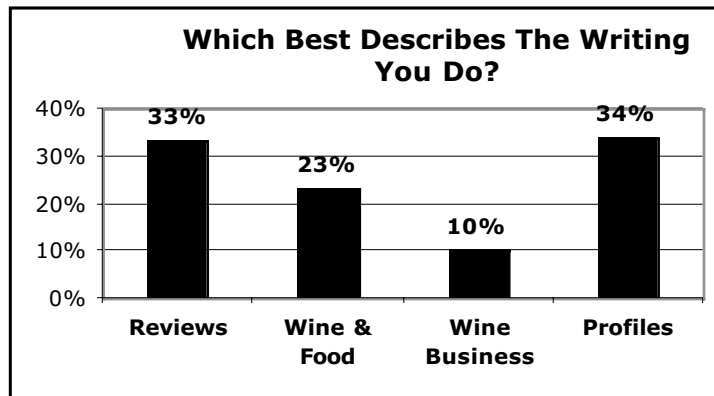
“awards and medals” being won show up thirty-nine (39) percent of the time and, finally, “trends in marketing or production” are address only eleven (11) percent of the time.

Clearly marketers and winery principles believe writers want to know about new wines and the medals and awards they have won. The problem is that marketers and publicists aren’t giving the writers what they really want or need.

Asked to describe the type of writing they do, respondents made clear why they have

such disregard for the usefulness of the press releases they receive. Forty-five (45) percent said "The business of wine" or "Profiles of people, wineries and

trends" best describe the type of writing they do. Relating this response to the number of press releases writers receive concerning trends in marketing and production and the discrepancy becomes clear. Twenty-three (23) percent of respondents cited wine in the context of food as their primary focus. Even more telling is that of those who say



"Profiles of people, wineries and trends" best describe their focus, forty-five (45) percent also say press releases tend to be "rarely useful", this is compared to the overall response rate of thirty-six (36) percent who said press releases are rarely useful.

Finally, recognizing that a writer is not always at liberty to write about the things that interest them but rather what their editor demands, we asked in our survey which two topics writers find most compelling to write about. "Personalities" was far and away the most compelling topic for writers with forty-two (42) percent of respondents citing an interest in people. Terroir, Winemaking, wine reviewing and "other" were grouped together with somewhere between twenty-five (25) and thirty (30) percent of respondents citing these topics as most compelling. The business of wine and wine events was cited by thirteen percent of respondents.

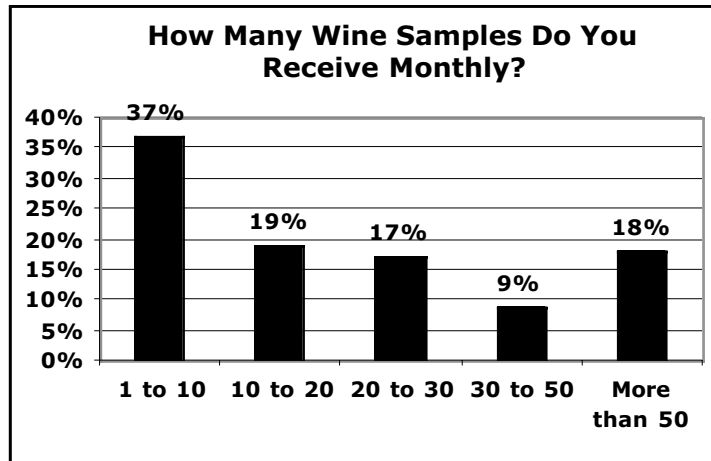
The "other" category offered as a choice saw some interesting responses. "Wine Education" and "wine with food" were both mentioned numerous times as important topics of interest to writers. Only one writer mentioned "Sex and wine".

#### *Press Samples*

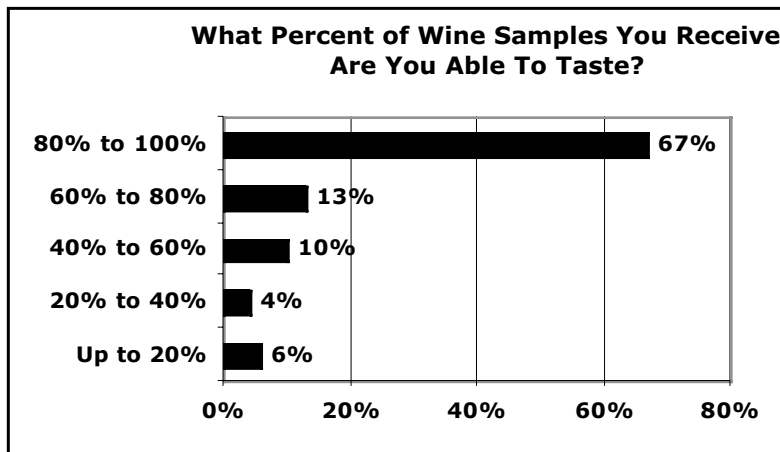
It is a near immutable law of wine marketing that "if they can't taste it, they can't write about it." This is why we send press samples.

The business of deciding who gets press samples is complex and ultimately expensive for the winery. The cost of shipping alone can be very high. So, the idea is to carefully identify which writers should get samples and who wants to get samples. Wineries and marketers may not be doing a good job of this.

Most respondents (37 percent) reported receiving only 1-10 wine samples per month. Twenty-seven (27) percent of respondents said they got 30 samples or more. Thirty-six (36) percent of respondents receive 10- 30 samples per month. Eighteen (18) percent receive more than 50 samples per month.



One would expect that those writers who tend to do primarily ratings and reviews of wines would receive far more wine samples. In fact, of those who identify themselves in



this manner only twenty-six (26) say they receive 50 or more samples per month and only five (5) percent say they receive 30-50 wine samples per month. The “profile and trend” writers receive just as many samples as the reviewers.

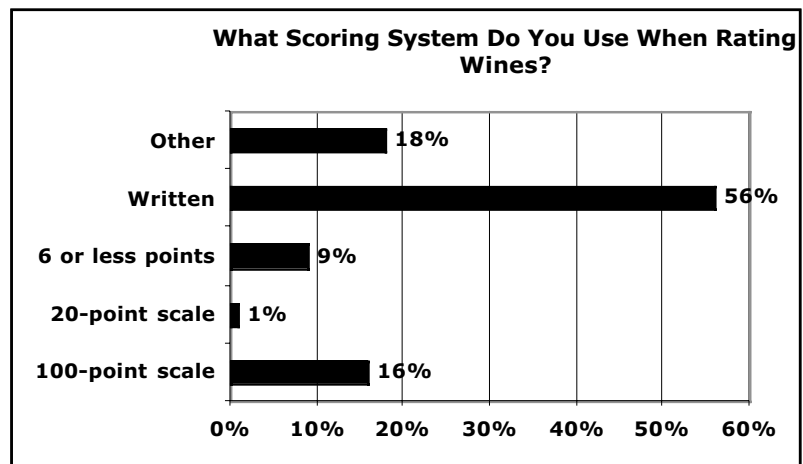
Of course the question many wineries have is, “are they even trying the wines we send them?” The answer is, generally, yes.

The vast majority of respondents (67%) said they taste 80 to 100 percent of the samples they receive. A total of 10% of respondents admitted they only taste up to

40% of the samples they receive. The group of writers that receive more than fifty samples per month are an interesting, and busy lot. They taste a larger percentage of wines they receive than the average respondent. Seventy-seven (77) percent said they taste at least 80% of all the samples they receive. And none said they taste less than 40% of the wines that end up on their doorstep. But also interesting to

note is that every single one said they would prefer to be contacted by marketers via email. As well, every one of them wants to receive their press releases via email and that's because they receive a lot of them: Seventy-eight percent of the heavy tasters receive over 50 press releases a month. Finally, fully 50% of this group described press releases as "rarely useful" while not a one them said the releases were "very useful". Clearly these are busy people who just want to be left alone to taste. And why shouldn't they...they've got a lot of tasting to do.

Finally, there is the question of how these press samples are reviewed and scored. While the 100-point



scale seems omnipresent within the wine industry, this is only due to the fact that the most influential publications and reviewers utilize it. When asked what system was used to review or rate wines Fifty-four (54) percent of respondents said with a written description only. The 100-point rating system was cited by only eighteen (18) percent of the respondents while twelve (12) percent said they used a rating system with no more than six categories. Even among those who qualify the type of writing they do as "reviews and ratings" the number that cite the 100-point scale as their system rises to only twenty-three (23) percent.

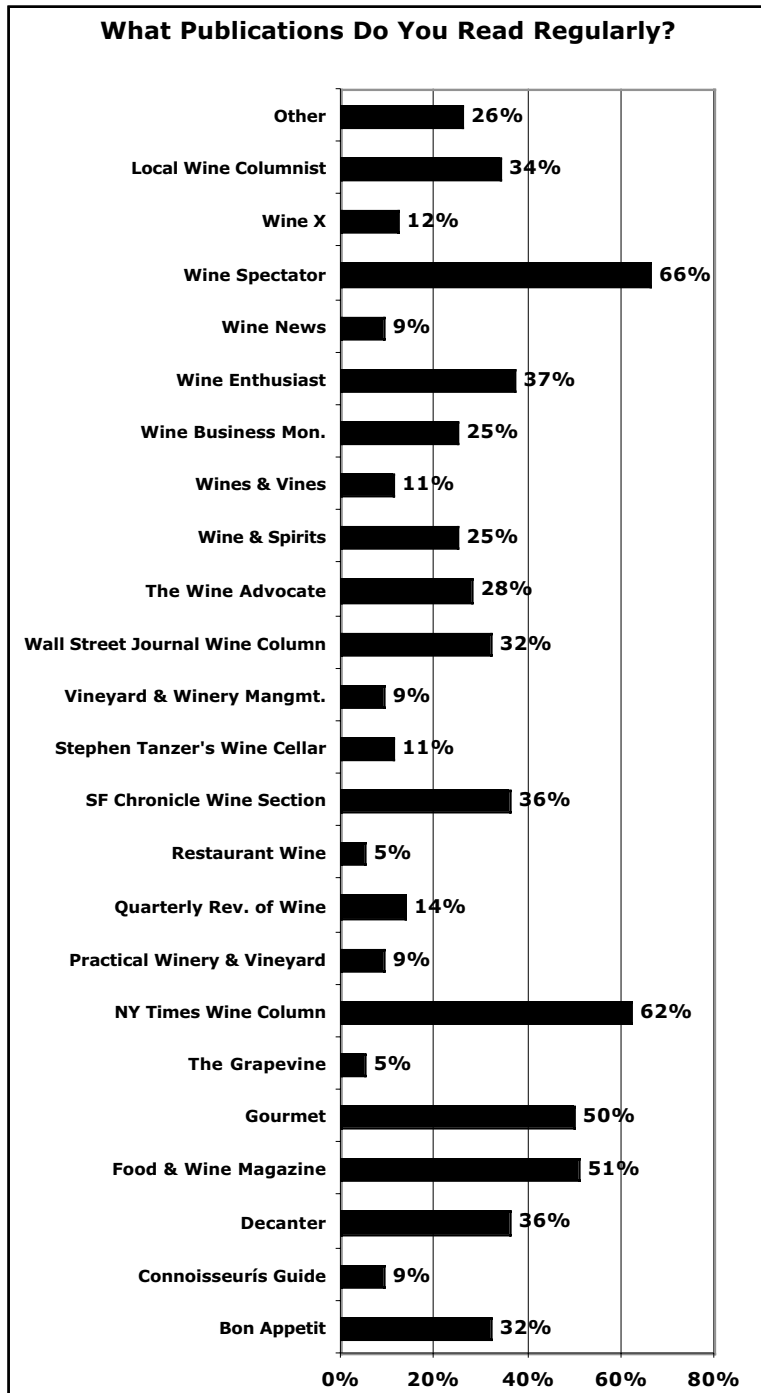
Finally, it appears that the Davis 20-point scale has fallen out of favor with wine writers. Only one respondent cited it as the system they use to review wines. And we currently

only know of one significant publication that continues to use something like a 20-point rating system: "The California Grapevine"

### WHAT WRITERS READ

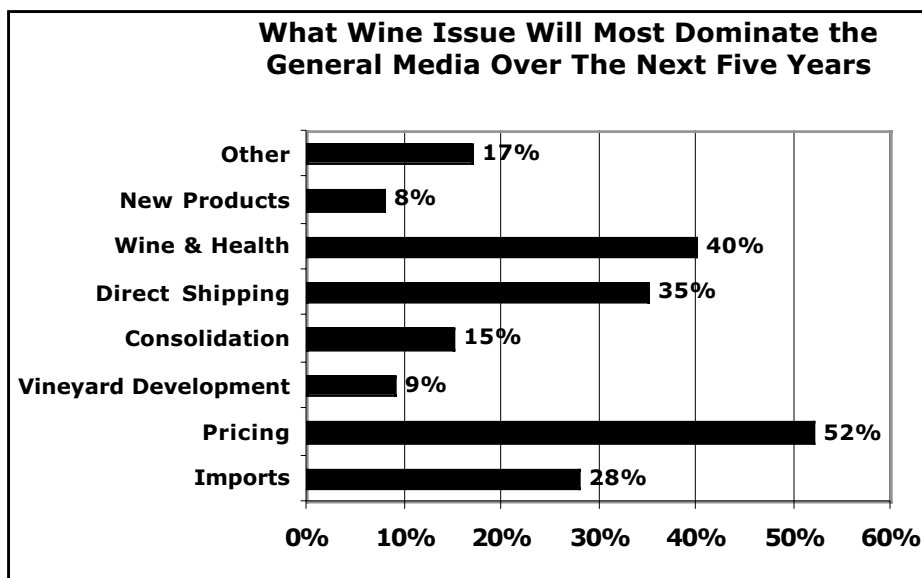
It is difficult to draw any significant conclusions from the responses given to this question. However, it is noteworthy that the predominantly food-related publications such as *Gourmet*, *Bon Appetit* and *Food & Wine* score are very high on the wine writers' radar. The *New York Times* wine column and *Wine Spectator* far outdistance other wine related selections, while the *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Section, in just a short time in operation, seems to have the eye of the industry.

Finally, there were a number of other publications mentioned under the "other" category. Among those that saw multiple mentions were *Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences* newsletter and *Greg Walter's Pinot Report*.



## WHAT WINE WRITERS THINK

*How Will Wine Be Portrayed in the General Media?*



Perhaps the biggest difference between this American Wine Writer Survey and the one conducted a decade ago is the inclusion of questions concerning

topics and issues currently being discussed within the wine industry. The point of including these questions was to get a handle on how this segment of the wine industry, the media, views these important issues.

Asked to use their crystal ball to speculate upon which wine issues and topics are most likely to find their way into the general media over the next five years a majority of respondents (53%) cited "Pricing". Among the choices writers were given was "Direct Shipping". It should be noted that this survey was undertaken before the announcement in May that the Supreme Court of the United States would take up the issue of direct shipping. In this survey thirty-five (35) percent cited direct shipping as one of the issues most likely to catch the attention of the general media in the coming years. This percentage most certainly would have been higher had the survey been taken after the Supreme Court announcement.

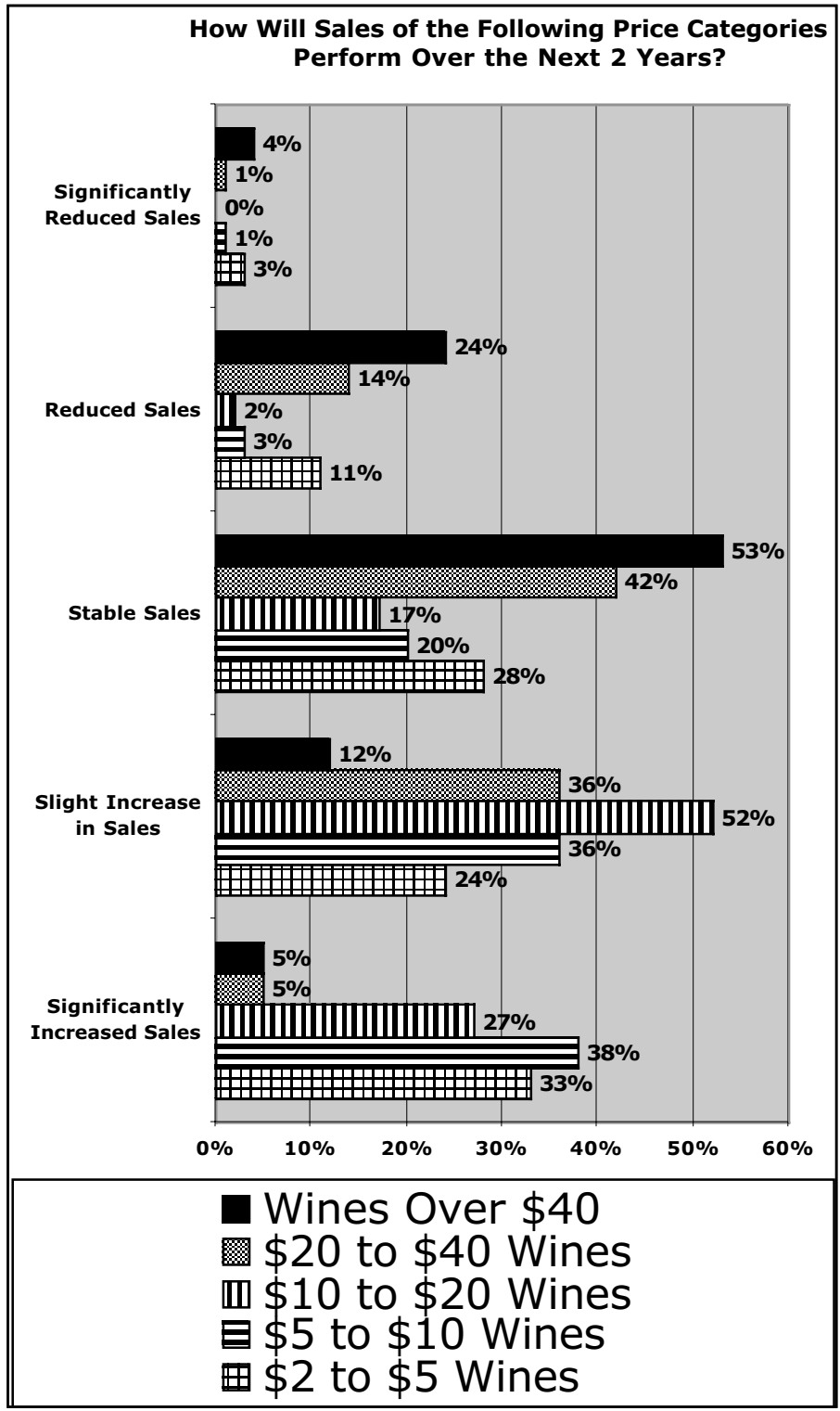
### *Bullish on Sales Trends*

The wine writing community is always among the first to witness new trends in marketing, pricing and sales. This gives them a particularly good vantage point in looking at future sales trends.

Asked to consider the sales trends in five pricing categories over the next two years, America's wine writers give some very specific and interesting responses.

The most striking finding is that Eighty-two (82) believe there will be slight to significantly increased sales of \$10-20 a bottle wines over the next

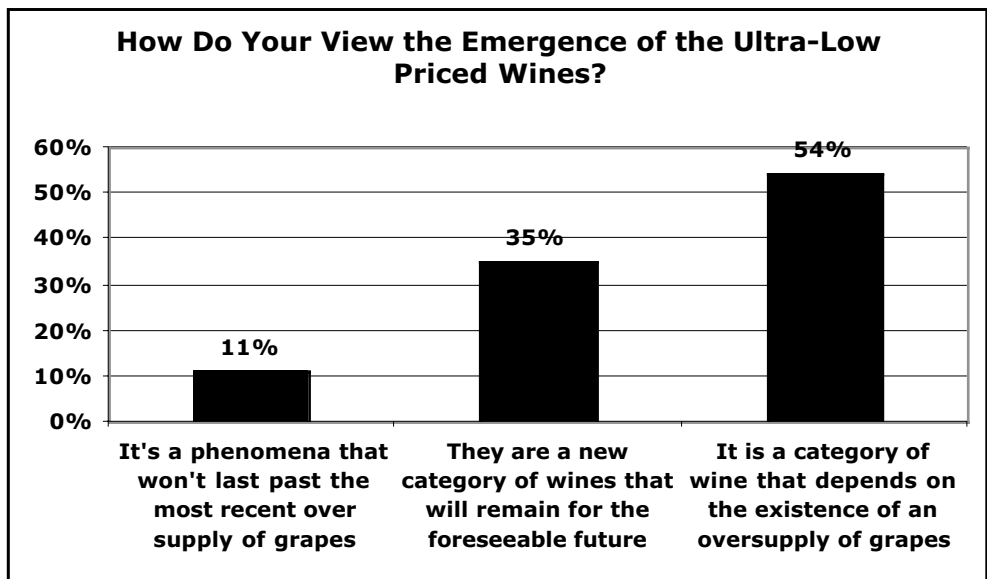
two years. Only two (2) percent said this category would see any reduction in sales.



Forty-two (42) percent believe that \$5-\$10 a bottle wines would see “significantly Increased Sales” over the next 24 months. In fact, there was no price category offered to respondents in which a majority believed reduced sales would occur. Even with \$40 a bottle or higher priced wines, only twenty-nine (29) percent of respondents predicted slightly or significantly decreased sales.

*Two-Buck Chuck; Here to Stay?*

The “Two-Buck Chuck” category of wine dominated the general media’s coverage of wine in the past 12 months. Writers were asked whether this category of wine won’t last past the oversupply of grapes, will remain a stable category of wines for the

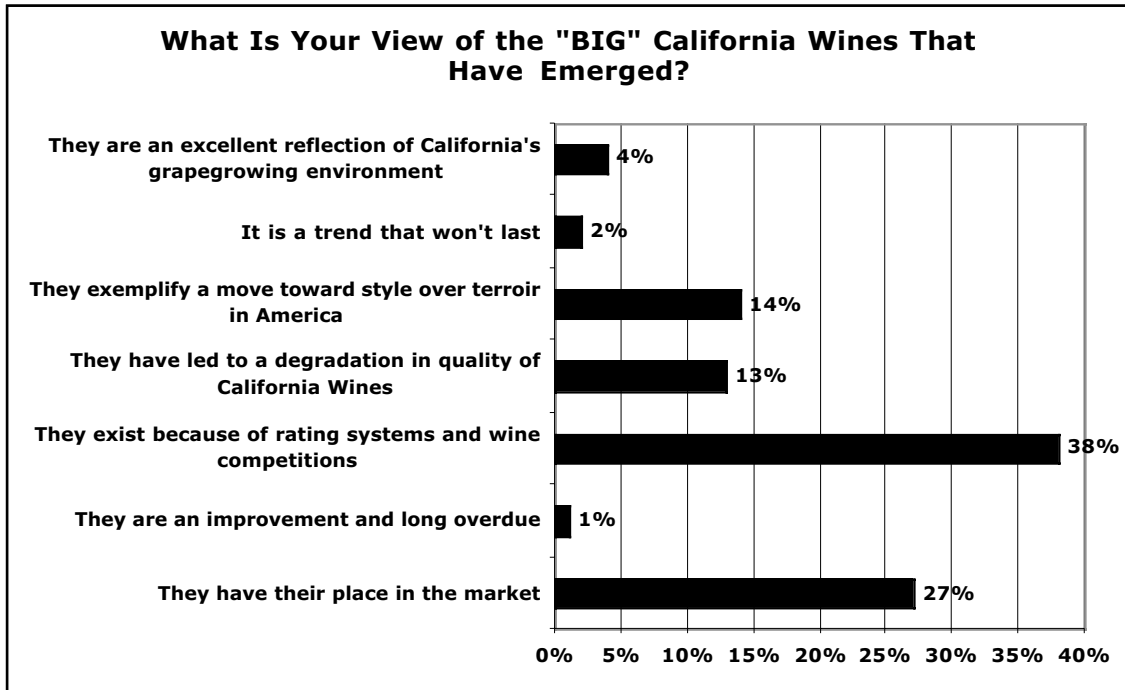


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supply of grapes. Respecting the power of the market, a majority of writers (54%) saw this category of wines as something dependent on the grape supply. It is worthy to note that the answers to this question correlate with the previous question on trends in wine pricing. Those writers who believed the “Two-Buck-Chuck” category was a phenomenon also saw a reduction in sales of this category of wine.

*Big, Unctuous, Massive—Good, Bad?*

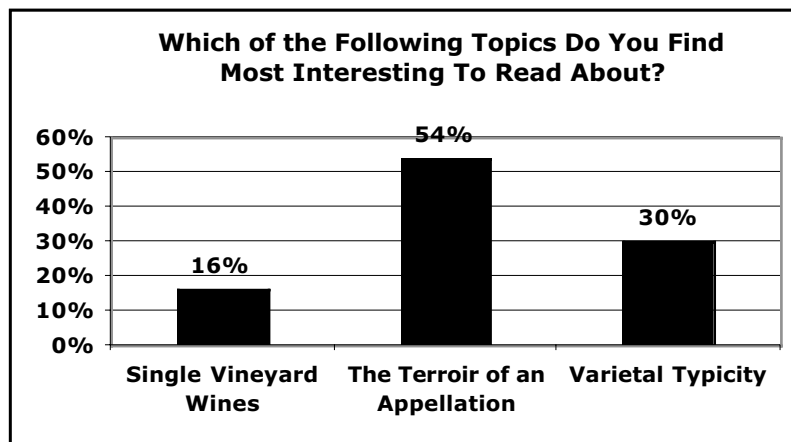
A far more complex issue, and one that is mainly debated within the wine trade, is the emergence of high alcohol, highly extracted wines. They are controversial for a number of reasons. Writers were asked to choose a statement that best defines the emergence of the “Big Wine”.



While a healthy percentage of writers (27%) chose to state that these wines “have their place in the market” a greater number of writers chose to define them as existing mainly due to the importance of rating systems and wine competitions. It is unclear whether this is an unfortunate thing. However, the thirty-one (31) percent of writers who said these wines either have “led to a degradation in the quality of California wines” or “exemplify a move toward style over terroir in America” presumably believe the big “unctuous”, “massive” wines are not such a good thing.

#### *Varietal-Appellation- Single Vineyard*

Most wines tend to be described as good, bad or indifferent reflections of a varietal, an appellation or a single vineyard. Over the past decade, single vineyard California wines have increased in number significantly. In



asking writers which of these (varietal, appellation or single vineyard) ways of looking at a wine they find most compelling to read about, we were trying to understand how writers understand a wine, what context they place it in and whether the surge in vineyard-designated wines has in anyway become the focus of interest for them.

Fifty-two (52) percent of writers chose “The terroir of an appellation” as the topic they personally find most interesting to read about. Single Vineyard wines cited by only fifteen (15) percent of respondents came in behind varietal typicity in the contest for writers’ attention. We think this finding is significant in demonstrating that, at least to the wine writing corps, it is the level of the appellation that is still defining itself in the most compelling way in California.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Drawing practical conclusions from the American Wine Writer Survey is not difficult. The most obvious conclusion is that there are a relatively large number of writers in America looking for something compelling to give their readers. For wineries and wine marketers, the key is to give them what they want. And their wants and desires can be fairly specific.

Knowing what the writers want is critical. In addition, getting the writers information in the manner they want to receive it will also help the winery’s chances of garnering positive coverage and will also make the writer’s job easier.