

## TASTINGnotes OUR WINE BLOG

### Global Wine Brand Anyone?

We consumers have an impossible array of wine choices among all the varietals, regions, and, most of all, individual wineries. How could anyone keep track? It's a problem for winemakers too, because the competition for shelf space has become crushing.

In any other industry, you'd expect consolidation to solve the problem. Think of shoes: Once upon a time we had village cobblers. Now we have Nike, Adidas, Puma. A great deal of consolidation actually has happened in the wine industry, but generally not in terms of brands; big companies like [Constellation Brands](#) and [Diageo](#) buy smaller wineries and wring more profits out of them by consolidating certain aspects of their operations. And sure, these big companies shut down unprofitable wineries, or tell a newly acquired one to drop certain bottlings. But by and large, this hasn't had much of an effect on the number of labels out there, nor on the confusion those labels cause.

One way that people have sought to deal with this is by learning about the tastes and predilections of specific wine importers—in the case of foreign wine, at least. [Kermit Lynch](#) and [Robert Kacher](#) are both names a person can trust in French wines, for example, so a consumer might look for their names on an unfamiliar bottle.



Now we're seeing the beginning of another way. [Oriel](#) is the brainchild of John Hunt, who founded the Seattle Coffee Company chain, sold it to Starbucks, and later founded Obongo, a software company that was acquired by AOL Time Warner. Hunt is an entrepreneur and brand genius, and with Oriel, he's on to something interesting.

The company offers a line of small-lot handmade wines from all over the world, and from a great range of varietals, all under its label. That way, if you're interested in tasting a Spanish Priorat, and you trust the Oriel brand, you'll feel safe buying the Oriel Priorat—or Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, or whatever. And rather than simply buying wines made by other people, Oriel is sourcing its own grapes and making its own. The company insists that part of its vision is to

emphasize regional distinctiveness. It also aims to keep prices reasonable by cutting out importers and wholesalers.

I tasted Hunt's "[Jasper](#)" Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir and was genuinely impressed. It was an excellent wine, and for \$30 it was fairly and appropriately priced. I've also tasted Hunt's "[365](#)" Prosecco, and found it likewise terrific.

Now, I'll admit that the Oriel concept makes me think—I like the homey, oddball quality of the wine world, with all its small producers, though it's confusing. If the future looks more like Oriel, where there are fewer wine brands, each with a far greater range of offerings, it could lead to homogenous wine styles. So that wines from around the world might continue on the trend of tasting ever more alike. Thus far, however, that does not appear to be what Oriel is up to, and I also think that, in marketing terms, it's a brilliant move. Consumers already stick with producers they trust—locally favoring this Santa Barbara Pinot Noir maker or that Côtes du Rhône chateau—so it's easy to imagine them sticking with a trusted producer that happens to make wines all over the world. In just the way you might settle on a given label of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, you could settle on a given maker of, well, just about every kind of wine you'd ever want to try.