

The king of weird, funky wines

Scanning the shelves of the SAQ, I overheard a woman make an unusual request. "Do you have any Rézin wines?" she asked the salesperson. Her request was not for wines made with grapes (raisins), but wines from the wine agent, Rézin.

Demand for wines from a certain region or grape are common, but hearing someone name an agency was a first. Smart lady, I thought, before watching the salesperson point out a terrific German Reisling, a superb California syrah and a close-to-organic Côtes du Rhône, all identified by the company's logo beneath the front label.

"That logo on the bottle was the greatest idea I ever had," said Jean-Philippe Lefebvre, Rézin's owner and my lunch partner at L'Express on a recent afternoon. "With it, we're slowly building a brand."

And what would that brand represent? "Our ideal is to seek out wines made by artisans that express the terroir. And ideally they would be organic. I drink a lot and I care about what I put into my body. I don't want chemicals in my wine."

Yet the SAQ does, a minimum of 10 mg of sulphur to be exact. And since most organic wine producers aim to offer a product with a minimal sulphur content (from traces to 8 mg per bottle), their wines often don't make it to the SAQ. Therefore, Rézin's organic wines (12 listings sold under the "Importations Sauvages" label) are available only as private imports through the agency or in restaurants.

Private imports are making an impact, says Lefebvre, with increased sales every year. But they also cost more. "I'm working to make different kinds of wine accessible to more people, but the SAQ isn't helping at all. There's an eight- to 12-per-cent increase in price for private imports. It's a way for the SAQ to discourage the trend."

Yet Rézin can't survive on private import sales. Of 113 listings, 101 are sold at the SAQ. "For a Quebec wine agent, there is only one customer, the SAQ. They buy the wine, they pay the supplier and they handle distribution. They control every aspect of the agent's work, from retail price to cost of promotion. Last year we saw a big increase in sales. But because of their strike, I lost half my income."

Restaurants have provided an excellent outlet for Rézin wines, organic or not. You'll find a good selection at Au Pied de Cochon, Leméac, L'Express, Le Club Chasse et Pêche and Laloux.

"Rézin has had an impact on restaurateurs looking for a natural, more handmade wine," says chef David McMillan. "Jean-Philippe is the king of weird and funky wines. And he always guarantees no headache."

Lefebvre's career began with cooking and hotel management classes at the Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec. His interest turned to wine after his first taste of first-growth Bordeaux. After three years as sommelier at the Bistro à Champlain, he returned to school to learn more about wine making, followed by stages in Alsace and Burgundy.

Rézin started as a bit of a fluke, he says. "At the beginning we were just having fun tracking down obscure bottles to enjoy with friends. But I needed a license to import them, and the only way I could afford that was to have products listed at the SAQ."

What does a wine agent's job entail? Travel? Wining and dining? "Our main business is to sell wine, not travel. And with over 100 products listed at Rézin right now, I'm not looking for new wines. I actually spend most of my day filling out forms or working in our warehouse."

And is the business profitable? At the high and low ends, says Lefebvre, but that's not Rézin's market. "Most of our wines are under the \$80 mark," he says, "and there's a lot of competition in the under-\$20 range. The \$30 range is the one that interests me."

Lefebvre says the people who profit most are not the agents, but the restaurants and the SAQ. "I'm not a corporate guy. I have long hair. I don't shave. I drive a motorcycle. I don't agree with high prices. I don't do this for the money. I do it for myself. I guess I just want to be different."

Rézin's Web site is www.rezin.com