

# Sharing Information about Wine on an Open Standard


An interesting discussion has begun percolating at the Open Wine Consortium (OWC) that segues nicely from last month's column on the heavy lifting that goes into maintaining a wine website. The OWC discussion is about whether it might be possible to conceive of a standard for wine data exchange. The goal would be a widely adopted format so that wine information could be shared between websites to help better distribute information about new products, tasting notes and sales.

Imagine a winery being able to display current auction price information on its website from a dozen auction houses around the world. As an online retailer you might want to display consumer generated reviews from a social networking site like Snooth or Cellar Tracker, and of course, make sure that customers of those sites know you have the wine for sale at the correct price. These features and many others can only be possible if the websites involved agree on a format for sharing information. If more websites adopt the same standard, it becomes easier to share your data and import data from others.


The OWC is an online community that consists of bloggers, retailers, wineries and others with an interest in wine. This is a global network with currently over 2,000 members in Europe and Australia as well as throughout the U.S. What makes it particularly interesting that this OWC discussion is happening is the experience of this network's members and their broad distribution. The task, however, is not a simple one.

## Setting a Standard

A standard for sharing wine data will probably include a few records for different types of information exchange. There needs to be a record type for retailers to share product and pricing information with wine directories. There also needs to be a record



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type for sharing tasting notes whether by a reviewer, a winery or a blogger. There may also be the need for a basic product record that describes the grape composition, alcohol content, closure type, brand and owner of a wine. These records would need to share a common product identifier, a project which raises uncomfortable questions about control. Who maintains the product identifier? How do I get a new ID? Is there a cost associated with this?

Normally, a discussion about standardized formats and product identifiers might happen at a technology company or a winery, but file formats and product identifiers work best for everyone when they are a shared resource. When these standards, especially product identifiers, are controlled by big businesses like eBay or Amazon it draws smaller producers into a vendor lock-in.

There is chronic fragmentation in the wine industry about how to communicate wines with a product identifier. At the importer and wholesale levels, the TTB-ID which is issued with label approvals, is the standard reference. At the retail level, stores rely on UPC codes that are generated

by wineries or importers, an imperfect system that has seen some improvements. However, any retailer can tell you of examples where there are multiple UPC codes for the same wine, often because different importers bring the same wine into the U.S. or the brand has recently changed owners. There are also examples where two wines show the same UPC code. These may be different vintages of the same wine, but in extreme examples can include different wines at different price points, albeit usually from the same winery.

## What Does Your POS System Do For You?

Depending on your choice of POS system, the data about the wine in your store has already been structured for you. Some POS systems don't include a unique field for size or even vintage, which limits your ability to tell anyone linked to your wine data about changes where you haven't created a new SKU. If this describes your POS and you have an e-commerce website, presumably you are working to resolve these data issues. But imagine if your POS system was based on an open standard and used a standardized ID that could be easily linked with other services and websites. Wholesaler pricing could be linked to the same standard ID, as could reviews and tasting notes. Of course this standard ID is not in use yet, although there are promising versions in use for different purposes including the ISWN and the AVIN.

The scope of the OWC discussion is broad and audacious. However, the goal is to provide a Request for Comments (RFC) for websites that might consider adopting such a standard. Visit the OWC website for an update on the discussion and feel free to jump in, the benefits from a standardized data format for wine are for everyone to share.

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To learn more about how the Beverage Network can help with a website for your store, contact Ian Griffith at (212) 571-3232, or visit [www.bevnetwork.com/retailweb](http://www.bevnetwork.com/retailweb).