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Wine Swag

By Jeff Harding, Sommelier, The Waverly Inn

Beverage buyers are often courted by brands who want placements in their establishment. This can include lavish meals and wonderful trips. And those are wonderful. But then there's the product marketing gear that is heaped upon us. I have some wonderful things like huge detailed maps of burgundy from Bouchard, super soft "Yoleaux" t-shirts from CIVB in Bordeaux, and a fantastic Columbia windbreaker from Oregon Pinot Camp. But for every great swag article, there's a lot more that is wasteful and just gets thrown away I wanted to ask some pro's in the field what swag they actually use and what is a waste of time. Marketers, take note!

Lana Bortolot, East Coast Editor, SommJournal

My favorite swag shirt of all time is from Gang of Grenache, mostly because it looks so bad-ass. And I am so not. I have given away almost all swag I've ever gotten—most shirts are ill-fitting, the scarves are too promotional with a wine brand emblazoned all over it, and if someone has given me something like a portfolio bag, messenger bag or knapsack, it's usually not what I need for my purposes (though I did get a nice one from Wines of Chile, but gave that away, too).

Corkscrews are OK, but I've given away 50 of them, and I still have a drawerful! I love the plastic IceBags for my BYOB dining out, and the bubble Wine Skins protectors — fine with me if they have logos. An Italian wine brand gave me a portable battery charger pack with their cool logo on it and personalized for me. That was good! For me, practical things like that are the best. Especially since I live in 700SF and don't have room for silly stuff. I also don't mind small notebooks—I can always use them, but they should be of a useful size.

Here is what no one should EVER hand out anymore: tasting room aprons (I now very politely tell people I have too many and while I appreciate the gesture, they should save it for another guest); heavy books with very limited use, i.e. I do not want/need a 10-pound book on your brand's research on the Sangiovese grape or photos (as artful as they may be) of beautiful Italians drinking your wine.

Julie Dalton, Sommelier, Wit & Wisdom, Baltimore, MD

Does my Nespresso machine count? It was second-place prize from StarChefs' SommSlam 2013 and is most amazing. Who needs a trip to France that's delicious for 5 days when you've got a Nespresso machine that makes every day begin delicious for 5 or more years?

Carrie Strong, Wine Director, Aureole, New York, NY

Some of my faves are t-shirts that are either wildly soft (Jolie Laide) or that fit me like a woman and not a young boy (Riesling Revival, Oregon Pinot Camp, New Zealand's Complexity). Also, a Reidel espresso tasting glass - something I'd never buy but fits oddly and beautifully in my glassware collection.

Chad Walsh, Beverage Manager, The Dutch, New York, NY

Definitely my branded Coravin from Merryvale Vineyards. I don't really like using the device at the restaurant, but it's hard to argue with its use at home. Being able to have a sip of midnight Riesling without pulling a cork is truly a luxury. At the same time, I would never spend that kind of money on my own.

Chris Struck, Sommelier, Chefs Club by Food & Wine

I often use my New Wines of Greece portable USB charger and really like it. I've received a branded digital wine thermometer which I thought was interesting. I've never used it, because I think most somms intuitively know when a wine is the proper temp, but it was unique nevertheless.

I collect really sturdy double-hinged (branded) waiter's corkscrews because with as often as I travel, mine end up being disposable because I always keep one in every bag and I end up sacrificing at least one to the TSA gods.

I've always thought really sturdy umbrellas would also make for super practical swag, as you get your message out for everyone to see every time it rains and quality umbrellas are hard to come by. As far as I know, no one gives these out yet. Also, Dom Perignon's Champagne closures are the best engineered ones I've ever seen and are so beautiful.

Ludovic Anacleto, Owner, Cru, The Little Wine Bistro & Cru, Wine Restaurant, Monterrey, Mexico

Definitely my "Je Suis Chablis" t-shirt and my Nike Air Max 90 sneakers, made of cork.

Jill Zimorski, Sommelier at Alinea, Chicago, IL

Most common is a wine key of course, but other things that I thought were really clever:

Washington State Wine Road Trip came with amazing swag - jacket, backpack, water bottle and an iPad (what?!?), but honestly, one of the most clever things was an external chargeable battery back up for your smartphone. They really understood the value of having all these people being able to keep their phones charged during long days/bus rides so they could Instagram to their heart's delight. I thought that was particularly smart.

When I went to the Santa Barbara Wine Trip, Liquid Farm sent me a care package in a sick tote bag—I Heart Liquid Farm Rose #pinkcrack! I can always use another tote bag, and theirs was especially clever/cute; I use it all the time.

I am also a big fan of swag sunglasses which seem to be a new thing at Food & Wine festivals...I hate the idea of losing my nice sunglasses on hikes and on the river, so it's nice to have an endless supply of neon-framed shades that can come and go.

We'd love to see and hear about your favorites on Instagram and Twitter with the hashtag #wineswag!