

Sommeliers can open our eyes to new ways of seeing
through artistically curated wine programs that tap
into the mind and soul

THE ARTISTS



MAZE ROW

WINE MERCHANT

IN WINE, WE FIND LIFE

In wine we seek truth, craft and the passion of discovery. In life, we seek to build a community connected by a love for wine and wine culture. We are Maze Row Wine Merchant. We inspire a culture of fine wine discovery, a life that talks of people and their sense of place, of truth, craft and endeavor. An enriching journey, encompassing heritage, terroir, culture and philosophy. Through our curation of wines, stories and immersive experiences, we share the best of life with the adventurers, the bon vivants, the passionate connoisseurs.



There is nothing more satisfying than discovering a restaurant with a food and wine menu that equally excites the senses. And while the chef may well be the one creating culinary delights, without a wise sommelier, the dining experience can feel incomplete. Their job may well be in drafting wine menus and running beverage operations, waiting tables and managing staff, but the sommelier's role is far more nuanced. You could argue these men and women are artists, curating experiences.

With this in mind, we asked a select group of sommeliers and wine educators to share their approach — tell us how they use their wine programs to encourage exploration, engage new audiences, and challenge traditional wine aficionados.

STEPHANIE CARAWAY, SOMMELIER AND MAZE ROW LUXURY GROUP ACCOUNT MANAGER



Do you view sommeliers as artists?

Sommeliers as artists is an interesting question as it somewhat places the sommelier outside the true beauty of the craft — a humility within hospitality. I find our continued fascination with celebrity and the elevation of the individual troubling. The tendency in the hospitality industry to single out one person, be it a sommelier or chef, and negate the many other hands that necessitate a truly unique experience, is problematic. Saying that, my deepest respect goes to the individuals who challenge themselves to push beyond personal desires and preferences and create well-rounded wine programs that endeavor to honestly express a place in time.

What got you into wine?

A love of books, history and travel. As a literature major, wine felt like books — a story to discover, unfold and engage...

What does being a sommelier mean to you?

... in service of. I have found while I may not make wine or run restaurants or retail shops, I can provide both value and a sustainable, compelling business structure to these pursuits to ensure their survival — something very important to me.

With fine wine culture opening to wider audiences, what are the challenges for sommeliers to engage those new to this world?

Challenges are always present within the craft, and we must listen, ask questions and educate.

Does knowledge empower wine experiences?

I think everyone is more excited when they learn — this dynamic is not at all unique to wine and food.

JORDAN MACKAY, NEW YORK WINE AND BEVERAGE WRITER, AND CO-AUTHOR OF “SECRETS OF THE SOMMELIERS” AND “THE SOMMELIER’S ATLAS OF TASTE”



Was there a defining moment, a bottle, a person that paved your wine path?

My interest in wine came early, reading Ian Fleming's James Bond around age ten, finding Bond's connoisseurship of wine, spirits and food alluring. Seeking the same debonair mastery as a pre-teen, I began looking through the few wine books on my parents' shelf. In college, I would revisit wine, procrastinating by reading musty old books by obscure British writers. But my true epiphany — the moment I decided to shift my life and career toward wine — of course involved romance. In this case a beautiful girlfriend and a glorious bottle of Bruno Giacosa Barbaresco snuck into a screening of Federico Fellini's "Nights of Cabiria".



Giulietta Masina as Maria 'Cabiria' Ceccarelli in Federico Fellini's 1957 "Nights of Cabiria"

You've co-authored books with a focus on sommeliers. What draws you to that angle?

I love the sommelier profession for a few reasons. One, to be a sommelier you have to be head over heels about wine, you have to live and breathe it. I draw a lot of my own energy

and excitement from being around people who have that youthful, electric attraction to it.

Two, sommeliers are a big part of the front line of the trade. They see and taste wines often before I do as a journalist. So, I get a lot of tips on great new regions, producers, and bottles from sommeliers. And, finally, to place the ideal wine with a certain dish is an ethereal act, providing the kind of magic that can elevate a meal, a moment, or an occasion to mythic status.

Do you have a new book project on the horizon?
Yes a few: one on smoking and grilling foods, and one involving cocktails and oysters and absinthe...



Jordan MacKay is working on a book about cocktails, oysters and absinthe

You compare a sommelier’s work to a DJ, composing experience through the wine order and placement. Can you recount a scene?
At the beginning of my career, after a great meal that went from sparkling wine to white to a heavy red with some braised beef, the sommelier took us back to a white Burgundy with cheese. At that time, I had no idea you could reverse course. But you can, and it was brilliant — like a DJ raising the beat and the volume to a frenzy, then chilling it down for a song only to get you bouncing again.
Another time was at a Riesling dinner, where we started with the oldest, richest wines and worked backwards to light and refreshing. By the end, it had lifted the whole meal, like floating off in a balloon despite being stuffed.

Do you see knowledge of the wine, the people, places and process altering the experience of tasting?
Absolutely. People hold up blind tasting as the purist form of evaluation, and it is, but in a limited way. A wine’s true dimensions go far beyond what’s in the glass. Story, personality, provenance, imagery, biography, landscape, romance — they all play huge roles in the enjoyment of a wine.

Having worked in hospitality, how do you transport the guest on the journey intended?
The best sommeliers or servers will always put the guest at ease, first and foremost. Wine is a touchy thing because people are either intimidated or have ego invested in it. The great sommelier will read the guest instantly and know how to proceed. Does the guest need hand holding and assurance and trust? Or does she need playfulness and discovery?
I’ve long maintained that within a restaurant, the sommelier has an unrivaled potential to elevate a guest’s experience. Sure, the chef might come out and say hello or even send a dish that is memorable. But if the sommelier shows up at your table with a glass of 1998 Sauternes and says, “I know you didn’t order this, but I think it goes perfectly with what you ordered and wanted you to have a glass”, now that is unforgettable.

Do you have a favorite wine and food pairing?
To quote a friend, “food is the meaning of wine.” Wine is never better than beside a plate of delicious food. Many of my earliest wine epiphanies came with a pairing — a crisp Chablis and oysters, Amarone with a roast duck in a port-wine fig sauce, roast chicken and a glass of northern Rhone Syrah, and (all obviousness aside) you can’t do better than a glass of Sangiovese with a slice of pepperoni pizza.

If you were not drinking wine, what would be your chosen tippie?
I couldn’t live without gin, mezcal and amaro.

BRETT DAVIS, MASTER SOMMELIER AND MAZE ROW WINE EDUCATOR



ARE SOMMELIERS ARTISTS?
I believe sommeliers are more akin to curators than we are artists.

Do you recall the defining wine moment, the bottle that paved your path to being a sommelier?
I was working at Commander’s Palace in New Orleans in the mid-1980s when I was only 19 or 20 years old. This was when Emeril Lagasse was chef and it was considered one of the top restaurants in the US. My friend and I would hang out at a Flagon’s wine bar on Magazine Street every week for the sole purpose of meeting older sophisticated women. After a few months of this, we found ourselves not only appreciating better wine but able to discuss wine with some level of intellect.
One night the owner sat us down in front of a bottle of ’79 Batard-Montrachet by Olivier Leflaive along with a grilled baguette and a small round of aged Epoisses. That was the bottle that made me realize there was something transcendental about wine and set me on the path to learn more.

How would you define the role of the sommelier?
A sommelier oversees the selection and service of crafted liquids in fine dining restaurants be it wine, spirits or beer. The amount of influence of this role on the guests’ experience is different for every group of patrons, and each experience is as unique as a fingerprint.



Brett Davis found a life in wine with a bottle of ’79 Batard-Montrachet by Olivier Leflaive

How has your career evolved over the years?
Somewhat like a rollercoaster with lots of ups and downs with twists and turns in between.

Who do you picture, the archetype, when curating your wine list?
Always the guest: a wine list has to stay true to the style of food and demographic it serves. It should never be about the sommelier.

Does knowledge empower the wine experience, and do you find customers becoming more excited the more they learn?
I think knowledge empowers all experiences. However, it is a small percentage of customers that actually pursue more knowledge (or variety) with any level of excitement. Fortunately for me, my audiences usually are that small percentage of wine enthusiasts seeking more knowledge and different experiences.

What excites you about wine?
The more I learn, the more I realize how much more there is to learn. In addition to knowing viniculture and viticulture, the pursuit of true wine knowledge requires a sound understanding of the different cultures and environments where wine is traditionally produced. I have had to learn a good deal about geography, geology, meteorology and sociology of the different environments of these regions as well as the history, traditions and languages of the people who reside there.

Outside of wine, what is your tippie?
I enjoy cocktails, beer, sake, and terroir-driven spirits such as mezcal and Scotch.

RANIA ZAYYAT, WINE DIRECTOR AT BUFALINA IN AUSTIN, AND FOUNDER OF LIFT COLLECTIVE, A NON-PROFIT HELPING FORGE A FAIRER WINE WORLD



How did you become interested in wine?
I didn’t grow up around wine so it was unfamiliar to me. The first time I served a bottle without a screw cap, I had no idea what to do! It was then that I decided to learn more about wine. I became serious while studying at the University of Houston and working part-time at Pappas Brothers Steakhouse. Its leather-bound program featured more than 3,000 wines. It was so new to me. I studied really hard, in 2012 passing the intro level at the Court of Master Sommeliers and soon after, winning a competition for a wine trip to Germany.

And how did your career evolve from here?
On graduating with a bachelors in cultural anthropology and a minor in international business, my mum suggested with my love of travel, people and talking about wine, I should become a sommelier. Around this time, a regular customer at the Pappas Brothers opened a fine-dining restaurant in Austin and asked me to join the wine team. I took a leap of faith. In 2015, I passed the Court of Master Sommeliers advanced exam and started working at Bufalina, eventually becoming the wine director and managing partner.

What made you initiative Lift Collective as a platform for advocating equity and inclusion in the wine industry?
The idea sparked in 2018, at the heat of the #MeToo movement. I felt this anger and energy inside my veins at the extra challenges most women face in the wine industry. I reflected on my own struggles in Houston, where, despite my hard work I was passed over for promotions. I thought of the Court, where the whole foundation to excel in your career through the program catered to a small percentage. I had persevered but so many young women walk away. And I knew that if we set out to dismantle what is considered the norm then we can change things for the better.

That’s quite a challenge to take on. How did you set about it?
I ran a series of Instagram interviews with inspirational women in wine, which led to a conference in 2019 where we gathered an amazing group of female speakers. Then when Black Lives Matter exploded, like so many others, we started to examine our own approach. Of the 29 speakers at the original conference, 28 had been white women. Without realizing it, we had limited voices and, thus, perspectives.

And so we began focusing on people who have been most marginalized in our communities, to build up their voices. To reflect this, in March 2021, we rebranded our group as Lift Collective with a virtual conference featuring thought leaders from different facets of the wine industry. It was one of the most dynamic speaker groups I’ve ever heard in a wine conference. It has shown what inclusive spaces can do and it has propelled us to continue pushing forward.



Life Collective artwork by the Texas based mixed-media artist Chris Kelly

What does being a sommelier mean to you?
It means being an ambassador for producers who are stewards of the land. It means being a cultural anthropologist — building bridges for people between the familiar and unfamiliar. At the same time, it means being able to read people in an environment they may or may not feel comfortable in, processing the nuanced cues and signals they’re giving, and being able to pull from a database of knowledge, what style of wine they might enjoy. I see it as planting a seed, building memories. This is the highlight of my job.

Are your consumers more ready to try new wines and unknown grape varieties?
Absolutely. We live in different times, people travel and there are so many education platforms out there. My guests are definitely asking more questions, are curious and willing to take risks. Many wine programs are exploring the unfamiliar and sommeliers are sharing their excitement about obscure offerings with guests.

Do your guests get excited about the wider brand narrative?
With younger generations, it is about the story and the context; they are willing to trust their palates and make their own decisions. From my own perspective, knowing the wine producers and seeing how they work speaks to your curiosity, and you have people to tie those experiences back to — it solidifies the information.

How do you then transport your guests to that moment?
I focus on the individuality of that producer, why I carry their wine, what excites me. What are they pioneering, what’s different about them, and why should we pay attention to this wine.

Your wine program focuses on low-intervention wines. How important are issues of sustainability, to include fair-labor practices, to your guests?
In truth, more questions are being asked about farming methods than fair-labor practices. Conversations are happening in the trade community and I’m interested to see how, as sommeliers and wine educators, we can best communicate this with our guests. We should use the coffee and chocolate industries’ fair-trade certifications as a model. A few producers are putting labels on their bottles with all the stats, but more can be done.

What have you tasted lately that impressed you?
Benoit Courault “Eglantine” Pétnat Rosé; Lise et Bertrand Jousset “Éxile” Pétnat Rosé; and (and all-time favorite) Peter Lauer “Barrel X” Riesling.

If you were not drinking wine, what would be your chosen tippie?
I love a good gin martini with a twist.

BLAKE GILBERT, SOMMELIER AND SENIOR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MANAGER AT MAZE ROW



What got you into wine?
I didn’t grow up around wine; I was more interested in food and cooking through my southern matriarchal grandmother. I found wine through waiting tables in college.

What do you find exciting about wine?
The evolutionary process and being able to surprise yourself with new things. I lean more towards an old world, subtle, fresh style of wine.

And the bottle that helped pave your path?
A ’90 Domaine Dujac Clos de la Roche was the epiphany wine.

How would you define being a sommelier?
The term literally translates as wine waiter. Sommeliers work in restaurants helping guests buy wine, training staff, curating the program and running the beverage operations.

How has your career evolved over the years?
I knew I was interested in wine early on in my restaurant career and that becoming a sommelier was the next logical step, even though it was a bit unknown and not as in vogue as it is now. I wanted to work on the winery-supplier side,

since the closer you are to the process of winemaking, viti-culture and decision making, the more you learn and evolve.

Do you have a customer archetype in mind, when curating your wine list?
I don’t think there is a person or place that serves as the archetype for a wine program. The beauty of wine is in the amount of diversity that exists. Some of that is subtle, some overt. There are many iterations of successful and interesting lists. The most important thing is how that list enhances the rest of the business model and resonates with the guests.

How does knowledge empower the wine experience?
I think knowledge empowers all experiences — it is more about finding a way to connect customers to the experience than just learning. For some, that is traditional education, for others it can be purely experiential.

Are your guests more ready to try new wines and unknown grapes?
This is largely dependent on demographic, location and concept, while having a known dedicated wine professional certainly helps.

How crucial is it for the winemakers to be engaged with sustainable practices?
Smart farming is always important; there isn’t a serious grower in the world who would tell you otherwise. They will always strive for a healthy ecosystem, although the terms sustainable, natural, organic have been hijacked a bit.



Harvest at the certified organic Argiano winery in Tuscany

If you were not drinking wine, what would be your chosen tippie?
Bourbon.

Interviews by Nargess Banks

“The great sommelier will read the guest instantly and know how to proceed. Does the guest need hand holding and assurance and trust? Or does she need playfulness and discovery?”

Jordan Mackay, New York-based writer and speaker on beverage and food

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