

# A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

## SEEING DOUBLE

- Working the Floor and Working the Books -

**I** work in the wine industry because I am passionate not only about wine, but about sharing wine. I thoroughly enjoy my moments as a sommelier, but those hours "on the floor" are just one piece of the puzzle. Much work happens behind the scenes to make a performance on the dining room scene a success.

First, working in the wine world is simply fabulous for women. We are few and far between, no different from most other industries, but hard work and passion go a very long way. In fact, I think they go much further in wine. I believe this is because most people in the wine industry are passion-driven, and personalities bloom when connecting. It's like pollination: share knowledge, experience, wine and watch buds develop. Because sharing is an inherent part of the passion of wine, the wine community is incredibly generous. This is the principal that makes the rewards so great. The wine world is one of the most open, giving, charismatic industries in the world. It is a wonderful realm for anyone.

As a sommelier, the pleasure of sharing wine comes in so many ways, from having someone's favorite bottling on hand to introducing a table to something new that turns them into "wine folk." I offer First Growth Bordeaux by the glass at cost at one restaurant and manage to keep the cost under \$45 per glass. (The pours are big, 8 ounces, which is almost 1/3 of a bottle.) Considering 2005 First Growth Bordeaux futures are selling between \$900-1,200 a bottle, that's a pretty unique offer and one that might make an otherwise inaccessible wine available to more people.

Most clients enjoy speaking to a woman, and I've seen the same table react very differently to a man and a woman approaching a table to discuss wine. Personalities of the sommeliers always play a part, but I don't find it incorrect to default to stereo-typing the sexes in this circumstance. Diners seem more relaxed around women, which can foster the sense of adventure toward wine.

With the exception of business diners, most people want to have fun with wine in a restaurant, maybe learn a little something, feel confident enough to develop an opinion and then get on with the joy of sharing their evening in a special place. A sommelier's primary job on the floor is to talk with diners about great wine and food, and in a way, be an entertainer. Talking about trips to wine regions, describing wine personas, recounting conversations with winemakers and reminiscing over great bottles are part of the show. The "applause" is the satisfied looks on diners' faces when they are delighted with the right wine as well as their interest in speaking with you later during their visit. If the customer is curious about wine, and you can mirror his or her personality to help them get the experience they want, everyone has a good time. Sommeliers receive immediate feedback. No need to wait for a year end review with your boss !

More challenging customers are the serious aficionados. They may or may not be picky, but they definitely take a lot of work : running back and forth to the cellar (which probably isn't on the same floor as the dining room ), opening multiple bottles, vigilant decanting, keeping track of which wines go into which glassware, etc. The huge (and, again, immediate) payback is that they almost always share and sometimes insist on it ! What an amazing education on old, rare and (often) expensive wines !

Do sommeliers encounter snobby, condescending individuals along the way ? Certainly. Those types are everywhere, in every industry, in every aspect of life ! I find them when I help someone choose a wine, and when I sit down to dine. It's about perspective, or at least I try to keep it that way. Sincerely, it is rarely an issue. There is the occasional person whose body language betrays they don't accept that I am female, that I am young (I think I still qualify for that label) or both. I can spot the type in seconds, simply execute their wishes (as they usually know more than I about my list) and then find an engaging table on which to spend more time. The most difficult of this genre are those who know enough to navigate a wine list but not be fluent in the producers on it. They have the smarts to ask good questions and show a fleeting acknowledgement you might have something interesting to tell them, but they lack the confidence in you to accept your suggestions. The best is when a "resistance" table ultimately goes with your suggestion, likes it tremendously, then warms up enough to tell you and talk more about it later. Those tables can end up making my night.

Interestingly, I've encountered a few male sommeliers with arrogant attitudes. They're usually great people, people I would happily hang out with another time, but I suspect a competitive edge lends them not to be outgoing. Within this warm industry, that can easily be interpreted as smug and stand-offish.

As I mentioned before, an amazing amount of work goes into preparing for showtime : orders to be placed, wines to be stocked, industry tastings to attend, auctions in which to bid, margins to analyze, and don't forget to network ! As wine grows in importance across the world, and marketplace becomes more crowded with high end restaurants and savvy collectors competing with you in winery cellars and at auction showrooms, the best and the rarest are more and more in demand. Access to those wines is highly valuable. Casting your net wide is important. The obvious relationships required are with wineries, importers and distributors, but don't overlook the importance of knowing other sommeliers (who is closing and getting rid of top-shelf inventory ?) and the auction houses. Of course, to back it all up, a sommelier should always be studying wine, from viticulture and vinification to trends and current issues.

In the US, the business of the sommelier often encompasses "beverage management." Sommeliers look after brews, spirits, bottled water, private labels, etc. Depending on the orientation of management, lists are margin-driven or revenue-driven. Basically, is the focus to keep margins at or below a certain percentage of sales or to sell as much as possible ? Wine is a significant revenue vehicle for restaurants, which produce notoriously low returns, and should not be overlooked. Making deals and managing results are as important as stocking the exclusives and the familiar favorites. There is too much waste in the wines by the glass program and it's affecting margins ? The answer may be changing to smaller glasses, switching to etched glasses to mark the "fill line" for bartenders or investing in carafes to better manage servings . The details are relentless and keep sommeliers juggling...day and night. Ten to 12 hour days are not unusual, especially when month-end inventory rolls around.

At the end of the day, my career in wine is fulfilling. I taste, teach, manage, work-out (that 12-bottle case is 40 pounds!), write, bargain and share. I'm always surrounded by fascinating, passionate people. And, like anything in life, whatever you work hard for makes you appreciate it that much more.



*Christy A. Canterbury*

NATIONAL WINE DIRECTOR  
Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group

Candidate of the Institute of Masters of Wine

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EDITOR — AND - 14 rue Fèrrière - 33000 Bordeaux - France  
+33 (0)5 57 81 13 10 - contact@bestsommelier.com

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