

How the Boston area's female wine experts are breaking the (wine) glass ceiling

By **Nicole Graev Lipson** Globe correspondent, May 13, 2019, 2:19 p.m.



Cat Silirie, who partnered with Barbara Lynch in 1998 to open No. 9 Park, is now executive wine director for all seven Lynch businesses. (WAYNE CHINNOCK)

Hear the word sommelier, and you might picture someone in vest and tie brandishing a dusty bottle of Haut-Brion. Someone knowledgeable, someone sophisticated — and someone, most likely, male.

There's good reason for this. In the historically male-dominated restaurant industry, men have long controlled most wine programs. Just 34 percent of the world's Masters of Wine awardees are

female. And of the 164 experts in the Americas who've earned the title of Master Sommelier, the wine profession's highest distinction, a mere 26 are women. On an international and national scale, the wine world is still very much a boys club.

But in Boston and its suburbs, the picture looks different. Here, women somms have been rising up the ranks at top restaurants, breaking old stereotypes, and moving the wine scene in groundbreaking directions. Two of the city's most important hospitality groups — the Barbara Lynch Collective and Ken Oringer and Jamie Bissonnette's JK Food Group — have a woman at the helm of their wine programs. Women are curating the wine lists at O Ya, Fox & the Knife, Waypoint, Row 34, and other hot culinary destinations. And in the past year, several woman-owned wine bars, such as Rebel Rebel in Somerville and Nathalie in the Fenway, have opened to acclaim.

According to Molly Stapleton, director of new membership at the Boston Sommelier Society, there's been a notable increase in female members since she started in her role four years ago. And as a seller for the distributor Vineyard Road, she's witnessed a surge in the number of women making the buying decisions at Boston's restaurants: "I'd say that around 50 percent of the buyers now are women. When I started this work seven years ago, that percentage was around 35."

What is it about Greater Boston that makes it such rich terroir for female sommeliers? For starters, its large roster of female chef-restaurateurs, many of whom — like Jody Adams, Joanne Chang, and Barbara Lynch — have reached celebrity-level status. "With this comes the comfort zone of being a female sommelier here," said Theresa Paopao, wine director at Cambridge's Oleana, founded by another celebrated female chef, Ana Sortun. Paopao, who was a server before stepping into a sommelier role in 2004, credits Oleana's supportive, female-friendly environment for launching her wine career, recalling how Sortun encouraged her to travel and take classes as she honed her craft.



Theresa Paopao, wine director at Oleana (KRISTIN TEIG)

At that time, men still ran most local wine programs. But across the river in Beacon Hill was the trailblazing Cat Silirie, who partnered with Barbara Lynch in 1998 to open No. 9 Park. Silirie, now executive wine director for all seven Barbara Lynch businesses, was an inspiration to Paopao, and many women somms working in Boston today cite her as a role model. “You can’t overlook how important Cat Silirie has been as a female force in wine,” said Lauren Daddona, who ran the wine program at the legendary L’Espalier before its closing and is now studying for her Master Sommelier exam. “If there was ever concern about succeeding in our industry, she was a really good example that there shouldn’t be.”

Silirie’s inclusive staff training approach is a hallmark of her leadership. Daily workshops at each restaurant offer all employees — from servers to kitchen staff — the chance to understand wine and how to talk about it. It’s a stark departure from the traditional model, where one person serves as resident virtuoso, and now other local wine directors are emulating it. “My motto has always been: 10 somms are better than one,” said Silirie, adding, “The most fulfilling part of my work is having this incredibly colorful gang of people to talk to about the wines we’re working with.”

Thanks to Boston's relatively small size, this democratic spirit has caught on. Comparing the wine scene here to New York's, Lauren Hayes, wine director at Pammy's near Central Square, observed: "We have a companionship that's different. It's very much a collective hive of people wanting to push each other and lift each other up." As a newer sommelier, Hayes appreciates this openness: "If I needed advice or didn't understand something, I could call any of the women who've been doing this work, and none would ever say no. They'd say, 'Absolutely.'"



Lauren Hayes, wine director at Pammy's (PAUL JOHNSON)

Hayes also sees a correlation between the rising popularity of natural wines — her own specialty — and the preponderance of women leading area wine programs. The natural wine community's focus on sustainable practices, Hayes points out, reflects its compassionate and accepting outlook overall: "It's not so much that I'm in this role because I'm a woman," she said. "It's because people don't so much care that I'm a woman."

For some female sommeliers, however, womanhood feels integral to who they are professionally — in ways that give them an advantage. "I think women are naturally gifted at food and wine because of our superior sense of smell," said Deborah Hansen, owner, chef, and sommelier at Brookline's Taberna de Haro. "My women servers have outstanding talents and tend to out-taste their male

counterparts, for whatever the reason.” In fact, a 2014 study by researchers at the Federal University in Rio de Janeiro revealed that the female brain has almost 50 percent more olfactory cells than the male brain, leading women to outperform men on a range of smell tests.

Some less measurable qualities may also benefit women sommeliers and their guests. “Culturally, women have always been asked to perceive and anticipate people’s needs,” said Fen Katz, who was Silirie’s wine assistant at Menton and now works in distribution. “Women tend to understand how to communicate with a guest in a way that’s more effective in delivering a successful experience and the right bottle to the table.” As a non-binary wine professional, Katz has a unique perspective on the ways gender expression affect both male and female sommeliers: “There’s an authoritative quality that sometimes comes with masculinity that can be a barrier. Because ultimately, while the sommelier has the knowledge, that doesn’t change the palette and perspective of the person we’re serving.”

Despite the strengths women bring to wine service, bias still persists. Many female sommeliers have experienced male customers who question their expertise, “mansplaining” their own wines to them. “I think most of us encounter that at some point,” said Oleana’s Paopao, “but nothing feels better than being able to ‘womansplain’ right back.”

Some female buyers report being treated dismissively by importers and distributors, roles still filled predominantly by men. At a recent industry tasting, Rebel Rebel owner Lauren Friel was stopped by a vineyard representative who called out, “Hey, sweetheart, I see you have an empty glass there.” When Friel ignored him, he urged her to smile and tried quizzing her on her wine knowledge. “I’m 100 percent positive that he wouldn’t have spoken to a man that way,” said Friel.

Experiences like this, particularly against the background of #MeToo, have galvanized Friel and others to actively celebrate female strength at their restaurants. Walk into Rebel Rebel and the first thing you see is a neon-lit wall plastered with the words “Women, Sex, Power.” Sit down at the bar and you come face-to-face with a Planned Parenthood donation jar. “I’ve made it a point to create a space that’s very clearly, very vocally feminist,” said Friel. “I’m trying to show that we’re here, and we’re not leaving, and we have a voice.”

This same impulse was behind a recent dinner at the South End’s Mida, where guests sipped female-produced Italian wines to the tunes of Tina Turner, Stevie Nicks, and Pink. And when Haley Fortier opened Nathalie last summer, a spirit of solidarity led her to offer by-the-glass selections by female winemakers exclusively. “With our politics in the past few years, it’s great to support our own and lift each other up,” said Fortier.

Politics aside, restaurants have something else to gain from female sommeliers: more business. In 2018, women accounted for 59 percent of the wine volume consumed nationwide, according to a Nielsen report. Deborah Brenner, founder and CEO of the trade organization Women of the Vine and Spirits, has been educating hospitality businesses about this data’s implications: “Since women are now driving the trends, it makes absolute sense to put them in leadership roles — not simply to do the right thing or fill quotas, but because they’re going to bring the perspective that’ll help you be more profitable.”

With arguments like this, it may not be long before the word sommelier evokes an entirely different sort of person — and chances are, she won’t be wearing a tie.

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