

Essay: The New Faces of Wine

By Carolyn Jung
San Jose Mercury News

Like so many stories that reporters happen upon, the two-part package, "The New Faces of Wine" and "New Face of Wine Service, Diversity Increasing Among Nation's Sommeliers," came about from knowing what the norm was and recognizing the unique.



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As a food and wine writer, I had learned about the long tradition of wine-making and wine-drinking throughout Europe, as well as the new wine industry burgeoning in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Chile and Argentina. As a result, I also knew that sommeliers -- elite professionals who are in charge of buying wine, crafting wine lists and recommending wines to diners at restaurants -- historically had been white European men and their American descendants.

One evening, I enjoyed a fine dinner paired with several very fine wines at a posh San Francisco restaurant, the Fifth Floor (for work purposes, of course!). There, I met Rajat Parr, the restaurant's sommelier and one of the most highly regarded wine professionals in the world. What struck me was that he had grown up in India, a country not known for wine-making or wine-drinking. In fact, Raj told me about how as a teenager, he would read about wine and try to imagine what it would taste like.

After immigrating to the United States, he went on to graduate at the top of his class in wine studies at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. But his heritage often led people to underestimate him. Raj told me that once when he was in France, a French sommelier couldn't believe he was that skilled. So the French sommelier put a glass of wine in front of Raj, one not on the menu, and dared him to figure out its varietal, vintage and winery. Raj took one sip and nailed it. The French sommelier was chagrined. Raj said, "He couldn't believe that this Indian guy who's American got it."

Raj's incredible journey -- from total novice to renowned expert on a subject so foreign to him and his culture -- fascinated me. Women had already made inroads into this profession about two decades ago. Now, I was curious to see whether ethnic minorities like Raj were starting to break down this barrier even further.

As a Chinese-American woman who was most recently a race and demographics news reporter before becoming a food writer, I was keenly aware of how taboo wine and alcohol were in many cultures and communities. That was borne out as I talked to more ethnic sommeliers who not only grew up in families where wine was not consumed, but in some cases, forbidden because of religious reasons.

Raj led me to other sommeliers to speak to, as did Fred Dame, the president of the Court of Master Sommeliers. That organization administers rigorous testing, and bestows upon those who pass, the title of "Master Sommelier," which is considered the highest credential in wine service.

In 2002, when I was researching this story, there were only 104 Master Sommeliers in the world. In 1988, Japanese-American Chuck Furuya of Hawaii, had become the first ethnic Master Sommelier. It wasn't until March 2002 that the second minority joined the ranks, Luis de Santos, the first Filipino-American Master Sommelier. A handful of other minorities were set to take the test the following year. They included Alpana Singh, an Indo-American woman who works at Everest restaurant in Chicago. In 2003, at the age of 26, she passed the three-part test to become the youngest Master Sommelier in the world.

Numbers were not easy to come by as no organization really tracks the ethnic makeup of wine professionals. But statistics from the Adams Wine Handbook showed that wine consumption -- and therefore the interest in wine -- had been rising among minorities. In 1998, the percentages were all in the teens. But now, 32.2 percent of adult Hispanics consume domestic table wine, 28.8 adult Asian-Americans do, and 25.8 adult African-Americans do.

I didn't have to convince my editors to let me pursue this story, as our newspaper has made increasing diversity coverage in its pages a top goal for more than five years. My editors were all for this story, especially because this particular angle hadn't been written about anywhere before.

A story like this really exemplifies how diverse our community, and our country, have become.

Indeed, the *San Jose Mercury News* is based in Santa Clara County, one of the first counties in the Bay Area where minorities became the majority.

It is home to African-Americans, American-Indians, Latinos, and the largest population of Vietnamese people in one city outside of Saigon. It is home also to people from Turkey, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Japan, Taiwan, Cambodia, India, Israel, Iran, and the Philippines. And believe you me, every one of them loves to eat.

Which just goes to show that when so many newspapers focus their resources and attention on their news sections to increase diversity coverage, they should include from that equation their features sections -- including their food section. After all, features sections often can be a far more effective tool to educate and enlighten about other cultures and communities in a much more engaging and much less threatening way.

On our Food & Wine staff, we've tried to do exactly that, by writing such stories as where to find the best pan dulce, traditional Mexican pastries and cookies; the wonders of the

\$1.50 Vietnamese sandwich; profiles of migrant Mexican-American grape-pickers in Napa and Sonoma who now own their own wineries there; and the odyssey of a former Silicon Valley high-tech employee who returned to his homeland of India to open a winery and to start a wine-making revolution in that country.



Saeed Amini
(Photo: Rick E. Martin/San Jose Mercury News)

Which just goes to show we've also worked hard to find freelancers who are of Filipino, Vietnamese, Mexican, Japanese, and Asian-Indian heritage to write with expertise on their various cuisines.

Although most of our stories generate positive feedback from readers, occasionally a story that touches on diversity will generate some racist remarks. But that's rare. Usually, the reaction is more like the one received when I recently wrote a light-hearted story about my addiction to Vietnamese crepes. An elderly Caucasian woman called after reading that story to ask my favorite restaurant for the crepes. She told me she'd never eaten Vietnamese food before, but that this story made her long to try it. For her and many others, food is one small, easy way to sample a new culture, and to open the door to a new community around them.

The sommelier story, in particular, really shows the powerful connection food and wine can have. There's one person interviewed in the story, whom I'll never forget.

Saeed Amini is an Iranian-American sommelier at a Bay Area restaurant. Only his mother doesn't know that. She thinks -- at least until this story was published -- that he is the restaurant manager.

He said she would greatly disapprove because their religion strictly forbids alcohol. Saeed, though, found something in wine that he couldn't find anywhere else. He fled Iran during the 1984 Iran-Iraq war, leaving behind his country after witnessing many family members killed.

When he studies a wine list now, he loves to see so many countries together, co-existing on one page in harmony. He said, "There's an old Italian saying that water separates us, but wine brings us together. I went through a revolution. And I found peace in wine."

When anyone wonders how a Food & Wine section can possibly change the way people think about the world, I say just read this man's story.