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Valerie Venezia-Ross, Director of Member Relations and Development

Interview with Chad Walsh, Domestic Brand Manager for Skurnik Wines & Spirits

NYWGF: When was the moment you fell in love with wine/wine industry?

CW: I grew up in the restaurant business—after a long career in Washington D.C. restaurants, my father opened his own restaurants on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. His late brother was a restaurateur on Nantucket, and in general, I grew up around food and wine. With that said, working in restaurants in high school and college was just using my somewhat innate knowledge to earn some extra cash, and it wasn't until I was exposed to really extraordinary wine during my tenure at Aureole's original location on 61st Street, that I found a combination of the business I knew with the intellectual component that wine provided. I was an English major, and had a love of narrative, and here, in a glass, was an entire story. It was there that my sommelier career began, and when the restaurant moved to 42nd Street, I became one full-time.

NYWGF: What's your best experience/event since you've been part of the industry?

CW: That's a really, really hard question to answer, because there are so many magical moments: New Years Eve at The Dutch pouring from a giant bottle of Champagne, earning a Michelin star in our first year at Agern (and partying really hard afterward), skeet shooting off the side of a mountain in Napa while sipping old-vine Riesling, or celebrating the summer solstice with bonfires and fireworks in the ancient town of Spitz, in Austria's Wachau.

With that said, when I was selected asone of Food & Wine magazine's Sommeliers of the Year, everything that surrounded that was really awesome. The team at Agern, not to mention my friends and family, were so proud and supportive, and going to Aspen for the F&W festival was magical. Because I was never on the Court of Master Sommeliers track, recognition for my work could sometimes feel elusive—sure a shoutout in the various restaurant reviews, or an article here or there, but this was something tangible that ensured my level of expertise. Even the photo-shoot, on a very cold April day, with my good friend and fellow nominee Caleb Ganzer was fun, even if we were both super awkward!

NYWGF: What's the one wine you can't live without?

CW: Champagne. Now that I work for Skurnik, and have access to the amazing Terry Thiese portfolio of growers, my fridge and cave are dangerously well-stocked! I love producers like Aubry, Vilmart, and Egly-Ouriet, but my absolute favorite Champagne is Salon '96.





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NYWGF: What do you think is going to be the next big wine trend?

CW: I've been paying close attention to the various legal battles being waged, namely one that was just argued in front of the Supreme Court (the decision will come some time before June) regarding Total Wine's, a big retailer, attempt to open a store in Tennessee. Although the subject of the case may seem very narrow, the implications are huge in terms of clarifying the rules for retailers who want to ship their wine across state lines.

Either way, I do see a shift, at least on the very high end, away from restaurants and into retail. Whether it's the "cool factor" of somm-driven shops like Verve (which has multiple locations), Bay Grape in Oakland, or even Frankly Wines here in NYC, or consumer fatigue with the dizzying prices on restaurant wine lists. I am a big supporter of things like a higher minimum wage and mandated health care for all restaurant employees, but it has begun to impact the P&L of restaurants already surviving on thin margins.

I'm not suggesting that people will stop drinking wine in restaurants, that would be insane, but the market may be more and more driven by savvy retailers, who, whether it's the use of social media, newsletters, and just good marketing in general, are revitalizing a space that was somewhat staid.

NYWGF: What would your "words of wisdom" be to someone who wants to have fun/learn more about wine?

CW: First things first: READ! I always recommend the Oxford Book of Wine as a perfect reference to have on the shelf. Organized like an encyclopedia, it's such an amazing resource for novices to learn more about words they might hear or read, but not be able to connect to the impact on the wine.

Secondly, what I see a lot of people is this anxiety about "not being able to taste," which is so silly! As much as I do think being able to associate descriptors to what you're tasting is important, and often helpful ("Oh! Zinfandel reminds me of a blueberry Fruit Roll Up," or the famous "Fresh cut garden hose," from the first SOMM film), people tend to get hung up on trying to wax poetic when they should be trying harder to approach the wine more pragmatically, and objectively. Think in terms of measurable qualities: acid, tannin, sweetness, texture, etc. and you'll be much more successful in terms of calibrating your palate.

Lastly, go out there and taste! A lot of restaurants offer consumer-facing wine dinners, and although sometimes the price may seem high, it's an amazing chance to taste wines in their proper habitat—alongside food. Also, many shops offer weekly tastings, and even if it means popping in for a few minutes to taste through, exposing your palate to a number of different styles. And for heaven's sake, when you find a wine, or wine region, that you like, go visit!!! There's no replacing the experience of kicking some dirt and meeting the people behind your favorite bottles.

