

LUXICON TOUR: SAN FRANCISCO

by Deborah Parker Wong

There's nothing like a thorough review of the Court of Master Sommeliers tasting grid to remind you that first impressions count. Balance was joined in San Francisco by Master Sommelier Sur Lucero of Wine Access, who swirled his glass horizontally and carefully inspected layers of tears to demonstrate why careful visual inspection of a wine is essential during a fast-paced and insightful recap of the rubric.

Before the tasting commenced, Balance pinpointed the tipping point for calling a characteristic a fault while describing flavors. "The moment the wine falls out of balance, it becomes a fault," she explained. When deconstructing a wine in search of clues to its identity, Lucero pays particular attention to the length of the acid attack.



1 Lindsey DeSmith, Sommelier at Park Tavern; Meridith May, Publisher and Editorial Director of the *SOHM Journal*; Sur Lucero, MS, of Wine Access; Gillian Ballance, MS; and Jenna Basaldu of Echo & Rig Steakhouse at DOCO in Sacramento. (Not pictured is winner Kim Oshiro of Argon Wine Systems.)

Primed with tips from the Masters, you could hear a pin drop as three dozen Bay Area industry pros put their sensory skills to the test in a double-blind evaluation of four red wines. Candidates were given one clue: A common theme linked all four wines.

When all was said and done, Balance beamed as she and Lucero announced the three \$1,200 scholarship winners—all of whom happened to be women. "We had a highly-engaged group of tasters who were challenged with a tricky flight of four Pinot Noirs from four different countries or regions," said Balance, whose easygoing approach to the notoriously-difficult exercise both empowers candidates and puts them at ease. "I not arrived at the variety and most correctly determined Old World from New World," she added.

Winner Lindsey Young, a Sommelier at Park Tavern who is preparing for the Court of Master Sommeliers Advanced exam, said she planned to reimburse her savings account with the scholarship. Despite feeling under the weather that morning, Young pushed herself to participate. "It was good practice in the event that I'm not 100 percent on exam day," she added.

"Being part of the Court is far more than education; it's a sense of community," said Kim Oshiro, an entrepreneur who has developed a large-format argon dispensing system for restaurants and tasting rooms. "I'd like to thank SOHM Foundation for supporting and facilitating these opportunities for continuing education." Young and Oshiro were joined by winner Jenna Basaldu of Echo & Rig Steakhouse at DOCO in Sacramento.



Treasury created a terrific flight of well-thought-out Pinots from some of the leading areas in the world," shared Master Sommelier Sur Lucero of Wine Access. "The Pinots were only matched by the talent who took part in this great event!"



Posing with Master Sommelier Gillian Ballance are two of the Las Vegas blind tasting winners: Peter Plash, Wine Specialist/Key Accounts at Négoce, and Kirk Peterson, Beverage Director of Hotel & Restaurant Hospitality Group.

LUXICON TOUR: LAS VEGAS

by Jessie Birschbach

In a private, nondescript room of The Mirage Hotel and Casino, Ira Harmon, MS and Business Development Manager of Fine Wine for Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, adjusted his bowtie and clarified he had a bit of a cold. If anyone expected that to slow Harmon down, he quickly proved them wrong as he provided colorful commentary to Balance's deductive tasting seminar and, later, hit the Castello di Gabbiano 2013 Riserva Chianti Classico nail on the head during his blind tasting demonstration.

Just like the other cities, all somms who attended the Las Vegas Luxicon event sponsored by Treasury Wine Estates competed for the \$1,200 scholarship cash prize. The group methodically tasted their way through a quad of Pinot Noirs: Etude 2014 Fiddletix Vineyard Pinot Noir, Sta. Rita Hills; Giant Steps 2015 Yarra



2 Master Sommeliers Gillian Ballance and Ira Harmon, Business Development Manager of Fine Wine for Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, at the Luxicon Treasury Wine Estates deductive tasting seminar in Las Vegas.



3 He may have had to leave early for work, but he still left a great impression. Rivesa Sommelier Norman Acosta, the third Las Vegas participant to win the Luxicon Treasury Wine Estates scholarship, follows along carefully during the tasting seminar.

Valley Pinot Noir, Australia; Franz Haas 2015 Pinot Nero, Trentino Alto-Adige, Italy; and Escarpment 2014 Pinot Noir, Martinborough, New Zealand.

The day culminated in a leisurely Treasury Wine Estates walk-around tasting. Somms and distributors nibbled on hors d'oeuvres, sipping on a few gems from the TWE portfolio—the Penfolds 2012 Grange, Stag's Leap 2014 The Leap Cabernet Sauvignon, and Chateau St. Jean 2014 "Cinq Cépages" Red Blend, to name a few—as Balance announced the winners.

A FEW DEDUCTIVE TASTING TIPS FROM THE MASTERS IN LUXICON LAS VEGAS

SIGHT There's a term called "water white," which usually means lack of color that we use and is acceptable for the grid. —Ira Harmon

Color is something that I used to just brush under the table when I was studying to pass the tasting portion because I just wanted to get it over with and get to the nose and palate. However, I learned after failing the tasting portion how important sight is and really how many clues you can get from those first five or six points. —Gillian Ballance

Secondary color or hue for me is the outer colors I see when I tilt the glass and look at the very core. In white wines you can see silver hues; typically these are grape varieties that are low in pigment or you can have some greenish hues. That could be wines from cool-climate regions. There are also copper hues—grapes like Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, or Muscat that turn a little pink on the skins at verasion can give you that copper hue. —GB

The green normally to me can suggest that it's a young wine less than three to four years old, and bottled very fresh. —IH

NOSE Most people gravitate to smelling down low in the glass, but go up to the top of the glass for the secondary and tertiary aromas. —IH

Fruit condition is usually an indication of climate or ripeness of fruit at the time of picking. It's a very important part of your deductive tasting. —GB

PALATE Master Sommelier Reggie Narito would say to me, "Just count to four," and based on where the acid hits you when you're counting is where it lands on the scale. For instance, if I get that immediate sensation of watering, it'd be up in the high part of the scale. —GB

TEXTURE Has never been more relevant than it is today. We're starting to teach that now at the Advanced level. We haven't been stressing texture at the Master level quite yet, but all the future Advanced sommeliers will have to name cream, round, or lean. —IH

