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Students at the Virginia Wine & Spirits Academy

INSIDER

IN VINO VERITAS

Richmond is home to the state's sole wine academy

By Helen Mitternight

October is Virginia Wine Month, and with the state's vintages starting to earn their rightful place among West Coast and European wines, it's time to appreciate that every glass of wine has a narrative, if you learn how to read it.

"Wine is like a story, a history of different cultures. Every country has their way of making it, and it's interesting to see how each country makes use of the environment, the weather, the soil, the geography. Once you know, you know how much effort and time and patience goes into every glass," says Elizabeth Tsai, general manager at Ginger Red Asian Bistro in Mechanicsville.

Tsai is certified at Level 3, which is

the highest level conferred by the Wine & Spirit Education Trust, and she is one of about 1,500 who have become certified through Richmond's Virginia Wine & Spirits Academy. The internationally prestigious WSET, founded in 1969, runs programs in more than 70 countries in 15 languages, but VAWSA — with a tiny staff but outsized importance — is the state's only approved program provider for that certification. The academy also offers Wine Scholar Guild and Edinburgh Whiskey Academy certifications.

"The credentials at first glance are crucial for a certain crowd of people, but it's less about the credentials and more about the knowledge you gain, the critical thinking and what questions to ask about wine, and learning how to really

taste," says Megan Holland, wine buyer for Jardin restaurant in the Fan, also certified at Level 3.

"With tariffs [increasing], you could use that knowledge to put a good wine in front of your customers that maybe comes from a country where tariffs aren't as high," says Booth Hardy, owner of Barrel Thief Wine & Provisions, a shop that often supplies wines for classes held at the academy.

"There's a tremendous amount of turnover in the hospitality industry, but I've found that when staff get this training, they're more engaged, they know more. I know WSET has a lot of research that sales increase for bar and beverage programs when the staff is actually trained," academy founder Tracy Waldron says.

That desire for engagement is why Von Vergundia, chef de cuisine at the Country Club of Virginia, earned his WSET Level 3.

"It's really helped a lot. My front-of-house manager and I discuss pairings whenever we make a menu, and I use

my tasting notes based on what I learned from the WSET program. We do a lot of wine dinners, and I'm glad I can help with the wine program that way," Vergundia says.

During the pandemic, the online option for VAWSA classes became essential; many hospitality workers, including Tsai, took advantage of the enforced leisure time to enhance their knowledge of the wines they were selling.

"When [those hospitality workers] went back, they were much more capable of upselling or, more importantly, putting the right glass of wine in front of the right person," Waldron says.

These learning opportunities aren't just for industry pros. Even wine hobbyists can benefit from knowing more about what's in their glass.

"I think any wine education is good, because if you are even passingly into it, the more you know, the better you can drink," says Tucker Flythe, former wine director at Saison and Saison Market. Flythe now works for Williams Corner Wine in Waynesboro and is certified at Level 3. "If you know nothing, the odds of you buying a bad bottle of wine are surprisingly high. If you don't know good wine from bad wine, WSET is a great pathway because you learn it's a way to refine your buying as well as refine your palate."

Waldron works on events for wineries, corporations, museums, and food and wine festivals. She even collaborates

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—Tracy Waldron, VAWSA



Tracy Waldron,
WSET certified
educator with
VAWSA

with local chefs for food and wine pairing sessions and has offered a miniseries on wine tasting and pairing for MBA students at the University of Richmond. A group of busy Richmond career women admitted that their book club had turned into a wine club and enlisted Waldron to curate a selection of wines highlighting different grapes or different regions.

Waldron says that despite reports of some younger adults spurning wine, she's seen the opposite.

"When we started in 2017, the ages of folks taking classes were much older," Waldron says. "I think where we're starting to see Gen Z come into the conversation now is that they are focused on the experience. If you can show them that a bottle of wine doesn't have to be expensive, but it does have to be well-made, and there's a story about the place it was grown, the family that grew it, the cuisine of the place where the wine was made, that's how we're reaching the younger generation. They want to understand the product, not just drink something because it has alcohol in it."

Waldron believes wine education creates ambassadors who will talk about wine culture. "That dialogue creates an ecosystem that everyone can feel comfortable participating in and ensures we all appreciate and enjoy what we drink," she says, an ecosystem that cements the academy's relevance in the future. ■

WSET Wine Levels Three cheers for three levels of wine education

- 1** The beginner qualification provides basic knowledge of wine types and styles, using sight, smell and taste to teach individuals how to describe wines and create food and wine pairings.
- 2** The intermediate tier offers instruction in a wider range of wines, including the eight principal grape varieties, the numerous regionally important grape varieties, where they're grown and what kinds of wine they make.
- 3** The advanced qualification gives wine professionals and enthusiasts a deeper understanding of the key factors behind wine production, such as location and bottling, and how those factors influence still, sparkling and fortified wines.

