

A Lesson in Every Bottle

FOUR SOMMELIERS SHAPING THE CHARLESTON, SC, WINE SCENE

by Helen Mitternacht

OVERSEEING EVERYTHING FROM award-winning restaurants to mobile bars, sommeliers in Charleston, South Carolina, are not just serving wine, they're educating their guests by instilling in them a tangible sense of appreciation for all things vinous. Read on to meet some of the professionals making a mark.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANTHONY UNGARO



Anthony Ungaro
The Restaurant at Zero George

Anthony Ungaro used to identify as a beer guy, but a trip to Piedmont and Tuscany made him fall in love with wine. Now certified WSET Level 3, he serves as head sommelier at The Restaurant at Zero George, a New American eatery known for its innovative tasting menus that appeared in the inaugural MICHELIN Guide American South in 2025.

Q: How would you describe your wine list?
Our food is extremely creative, but I would describe our list . . . as “everlasting” because it’s full of classic wines. We do have a few wines that are a little more “risky,” like a pét-nat from Cypress and a skin-contact [bottling] from Umbria. The younger consumer finds these a little more fun and refreshing, but I would say our average guest is more in line with Hermitage and Burgundy and Bordeaux if they’re ordering bottles, although they can get a little more adventurous if they’re doing a menu pairing and not having to commit to a whole bottle.

Q: What is your current favorite wine?
I’m a sucker for Meursault, so at the moment, it’s a Jean-Philippe Fichet Meursault Le Meix Sous Le Château. It has a very good balance, and I can sit on the patio on a warm day and enjoy [it].

Q: What wine trends are you seeing?
We’ve introduced more zero-proof pairings, and those have been a huge hit. And we’ve definitely had people literally requesting “funky wines,” whatever that means. They’re surprised to hear that most of our list is natural but still very clean. People think “natural” [automatically] means “funky.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIAN FRANKLIN



Brian Franklin
Merci

A hospitality veteran of almost 40 years, Brian Franklin is certified at the Introductory level by the Court of Master Sommeliers and helped launch wine programs in several

restaurants, including the tiny 26-seat Merci, which was a James Beard Award finalist for Best New Restaurant this year.

Q: How would you describe your wine list?
My list is limited to what I have in storage space, so [it] is now fewer than 100 bottles. But we change out our menu about once a week, so I am always getting a new wine or a new vintage. We are 100% organic or biodynamic or regenerative . . . and I try to source from small producers. At first, we were more French-driven, but we’ve evolved as a restaurant to be more [broadly] European-driven, so we have wines from Spain and Italy. We are 100% Old World, but a lot of these up-and-coming producers are third or fifth generation and are producing Old World grape varieties in new and modern ways. A lot of them are . . . using [natural methods as well as] concrete and unique fermentation techniques, but [their vines] are still old-growth vines.

Q: What is your current favorite wine?
Right now I’m really into a white Slovenian wine, a Malvasia by Hedelee. It has a really nice, salty, crunchy Mediterranean style.

Q: What wine trends are you seeing?
The price per bottle ordered may be going down a bit. But I think we have an approachable price point that invites people to enjoy an extra glass.

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Latasha Tavelle-Williams

Fermented Vines

PHOTO COURTESY OF LATASHA TAVELLE-WILLIAMS



In 2023, Latasha Tavelle-Williams—Charleston's first Black female sommelier—started Fermented Vines, a mobile bar that brings wine and wine education to homes in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia, where she conducts private tastings. Although her business is fairly new, it's already a

success: She was the runner-up in the "Best Sommelier" category at the Best of Charleston Awards last year. Her first glass of wine, she recalls with amusement, was a Riunite Lambrusco that she ordered at the bar in her local Olive Garden.

Q: How would you describe your wine list?

The wine collection I carry is pretty much high-quality [and] elevated, [going] from fun and vibrant to serious, classy, and sexy. "Classy and sexy" is going to be like a Burgundy . . . with a long potential [for] aging. It's soft, beautiful, silky, and elegant, and you can drink it easily. "Fun and vibrant" is going to be a Prosecco [from a producer] like Don Luchi. It's fun, lively, and fruity, has high acidity, and is refreshing. That's the wine to get the party started.

Q: What is your current favorite wine?

Cabernet Sauvignon from . . . Bordeaux that is rich, dark, bold, [and] fruity and has a high alcohol content. [This category] pairs well with steak.

Q: What wine trends are you seeing?

What I've been noticing is that people, instead of going to restaurants and having dinner, would rather have wine at their home. It's less expensive and you can get more people in the room [to share it with]. I have seen a decrease in the number of bottles purchased and the price. People are buying wines that are \$20–\$25 instead of the \$50 or \$60 a bottle they used to purchase.

Femi Oyediran

Graft Wine Shop

PHOTO: LIZZY ROLLINS



Graft Wine Shop, opened in 2018, is known for its club-like atmosphere that invites customers to linger and drink interesting wines. Co-owners Femi Oyediran and Miles White, were semifinalists at this year's James Beard Awards for "Outstanding Professional in Beverage Service." Both worked at the famed Charleston Grill, where the sommelier piqued their interest in wine after starting an impromptu blind-tasting program for interested staff. The pair also own Tutti Pizza next door to Graft—an ideal location, as Oyediran says pizza

is the "gateway drug" to wine purchases.

Q: How did you curate your wine list?

I think it's changed over the years. I always wanted what was on the shelf to reflect the mind of someone trying to put together the best playlist of their life. Throughout high school, I would always [make] playlists. [They're] a big part of the culture at Graft. . . . Think of your categories, say Cabernet: Here's my playlist of Cabernets from different price points. Our Gamay has eight slots, from \$15 to an \$80 bottle. We thought about our selection for a long time, and we interviewed a lot of friends and spoke to people about what wines are important to them.

Q: What is your current favorite wine?

I don't have a favorite wine. It always comes back to playlists. I listen to so much music every day; it soothes my brain, and as my moods change, my brain changes. It's the same thing with wine. You may hear a great song, but you don't want to hear the same song for six months or you'll lose your love for [it]. With wine, you don't want to drink the same thing for six months either. That's [also] part of the culture of Graft. We have regulars who come in and know to ask, "What's new?"

Q: What wine trends are you seeing?

Charleston is one of the best markets for winegrowers, but we have a lot of work to do in educating people. It used to be that the only place you could get some of these high-end wines was in restaurants, where you only have about five minutes to educate a guest on a region or grower. Retail is the battleground where guests become smart diners. Without great retail, you can't build a true community of educated drinkers. Once you have someone who comes to see you every week to buy a bottle of wine for dinner, it's a very different relationship than [you have with] someone who goes out to a restaurant on occasion and orders wine. I do believe a lot of sommeliers in restaurants should be thanking us, because our customers are going into restaurants more excited to order wine. 