

ON WINE

## An odd business

There's an old, well-known saying: "If you wanna make a small fortune in the wine business, start with a large one."

The statement, which now is a cliché, has never been truer — except for families that got into wine 50 or 100 years ago, never intending to make more



DAN BERGER

than a hard-won living or feeding a passel of kids. They face fewer headaches.

In the last three decades, wine has become a deep-pockets game. Just how deep is often a

shock, even to very wealthy people. If they look into the real costs to make fine wine on even a modest basis, they'll quickly realize it could be a lot worse.

Imagine investing huge sums on land, buildings, vineyard development, staff personnel, marketing, equipment and sales strategies, then realizing it will be about six years before you have anything to sell.

That's why wine industry business plans are hard to understand, notably if someone assumes they can be analyzed by traditional Wall Street formulae.

How do traditional business plans (and income tax returns) for firms specializing in shoes, tax services, software, and vegetables compare to plans for products that start out life making zero profits for six years?

Except for startup pharmaceutical houses and a few other "long lead-time" companies, wine is like few others. Imagine trying to depreciate a press that may be nonfunctional before the first wine is ready for sale.

And just try to predict what the next hot item will be. Almost a decade ago, virtually no one saw that sweet, sparkling Muscat was a fad so hot it would shock all the industry "visionaries."

No one was prepared for the demand for this "pop" product that led to many dozens of "moscato" knockoffs and to an instant shortage of the once-disparaged Muscat grape. The tipping point? Rap artists commenting on Moscato in their "songs," of all things!

And about as fast as it developed, the "moscato" fad ended, leaving an array of problems for many wineries (unsold inventories) as well as growers.

Please see BERGER, Page C6



FREDERIC NEEMA, OCTAMEDIA

Vanessa Conlin, Head of Wine for online Napa retailer Wine Access, is on the verge of becoming one of the few dozen Masters of Wine in the U.S.

## The double (Master) life of Vanessa Conlin

TONY POER

As Oscar Wilde wrote, life imitates art. If it sometimes resembles an opera, then Vanessa Conlin is seeing hers play out in two acts, with the curtain about to come up on a third.

Act one has literally been a production: a career onstage singing opera in New York, preceded by an East Coast education full of music study and performance. The second act takes place here in Napa Valley, where the respected wine expert works from an equally unique stage of her own creation.

Last fall, Conlin, a former ensemble member of Puccini's "La Bohème" and head of wine for the online retailer Wine Access, took her place in line to become a Master of Wine. It's a role she has gravitated to since changing careers nearly 15 years ago. The professional credential, perhaps the most coveted in the wine industry, is offered by the UK's Institute of Masters of Wine and currently held by only 378 people worldwide.

In September, Conlin received news that she had passed the first two parts of the notoriously difficult Master of Wine exam. Assuming she clears the final hurdle of an accepted research paper in early September, she'll officially attach a long-sought "MW" title



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Vanessa Conlin, from her days as an opera singer, when she was in the cast of "La Bohème."

to her name. And so will begin her third act.

Academic rigor has informed both of Conlin's career pursuits so far. She went to a prestigious boarding school in Richmond, Virginia, then moved up to New York to attend Manhattan School of Music for its four-year bachelors program. She finished in three, graduating in 1999 with a degree in vocal performance. Inspired by opera in particular, she immediately headed to Boston University, where she received a Masters of Music two years later.

Her father, Thomas Conlin, an accomplished conductor, was music director at the time for The Amarillo Symphony. While she was still in grade school, her family relocated to Charleston, West Virginia, where the elder Conlin took over as the artistic director and conductor for the West Virginia Symphony Orchestra, a position he held for nearly 20 years. Her mother, Renay, is a former opera singer and teacher who eventually moved to the business side of music.

With her parents' influence, Conlin's predisposition to studying music wouldn't surprise anyone. But she enjoyed some unique experiences in the working world, as well.

"I was performing professionally as an opera singer and did a show on Broadway," she recounted. "It was Baz Luhrmann's production of "La Bohème," and we were nominated for a Tony Award. We didn't win, but I was in the ensemble. It was really cool, because it was a full Italian opera on Broadway. It was great to see a new audience get excited about that medium."

Though the opportunity to work under Luhrmann, the director best known for the 2001 film "Moulin Rouge," was a highlight

Please see CONLIN, Page C2

PLEASE THE PALATE

## 'The abbey of good culture'

For many people, their first memory of Chianti wine is a bottle in a straw basket that you would put a candle in as soon as you finished drinking the wine. While the baskets have long since disappeared, many people think of Chianti



ALLISON LEVINE

as a grape, not as a region. And Chianti Classico is thought of as a classic style of Chianti. This leads to a lot of misunderstanding about the region.

Chianti Classico is in fact the oldest and most genuine area in the Chianti region in central Tuscany. Chianti Classico has had its own *Consorzio* since 1924 and became an established subzone of the Chianti DOC in 1967. In 1984, Chianti Classico was promoted from DOC to DOCG status and in 1996, the region became a separate DOCG from Chianti.

It is a rather large area that stretches between Florence and Siena and includes 14 municipalities. Chianti Classico wines consist of a minimum of



ALLISON LEVINE, PLEASE THE PALATE

Roberto Stucchi of Badia a Coltibuono.

80 percent Sangiovese and the remainder can be from native grapes Canaiolo or Colorino or from international grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot.

Chianti Classico is often thought of as a more traditional, rather dull wine. But due to the range of characters that Sangiovese provides, as well as a diverse soil and microclimate, Chianti Classico is a rather friendly, drinkable wine. And, one of the wineries that stands out and validates the beauty of Chianti Classico is Badia a Coltibuono.

Located in Gaiole, one of the 14 municipalities in Chianti

Classico, Badia a Coltibuono, or the "abbey of good culture," was established in 1051 by San Giovanni Gualberto, founder of the Vallombrosan order and patron saint of the foresters, rangers and parks. The monastery was active until Napoleon annexed it in 1810. The abbey was purchased by the Stucchi Prinetti family in 1846. By the 1950s, the property was a classic estate, selling wine to the local market and selling in bulk. Then, in the late 1950s, Piero Stucchi Prinetti took charge and began bottling the best vintages of the estate Chianti

Please see LEVINE, Page C6

WINE TO SAKE

## Farm-to-glass on display at new Nevada distillery

The charming town of Minden, Nevada, located conveniently between Lake Tahoe and Reno, is home to a state-of-the-art facility that recently opened its doors.

Bently Heritage Distillery serves as a perfect masterpiece that is home to more than 4,000 residents.



EDUARDO DINGLER

The facility is certainly a one-of-a-kind, delivering a variety of products now available in main markets — from a variety of gins to a stellar vodka lineup and a meticulous whiskey program to be released when timing is right.

We arrived to Minden a few weeks ago to learn more about the facility, which delivers a farm-to-glass approach like no other.

The reception was heartwarming in spite of the picture-perfect blanket of snow that covered the town.

The master plan includes growing the grains used to

produce its distillates to mills, kilns and malting floors all the way to the carefully selected stills, aging vessels and unique bottles and labels.

The facility, which took just over four years in the making from planning to execution, counts with three main stills all dedicated to a number of spirits. The first still as you enter the building is an impressive German-made Carl still dedicated to gin and vodka. Right behind it is a column still for whiskey production made in Butte, Montana, and at the end a smaller version of the German Carl for small batches.

The whole production building comes with a series of pipes connected to the different rooms that make up a series of channels to aid with transferring to the proper vessels.

Another impressive aspect of the operation is a set of temperature-controlled Rickhouses that mimic several conditions like those of Scotland and Kentucky for whiskey aging.

Please see EDUARDO, Page C2



# Conlin

From C1

of Conlin's young career, she noted that the ensemble role during La Bohème's seven-month run was an exception to what she called the "gig-to-gig" nature of the profession, in which "you're working, and then you're not working for a while until you go to another gig, and it's always a lot of travel."

Via moments of down time in New York, Conlin came to her interest in wine more or less by her own lights. She was living a hectic artist's schedule, but in a vibrant, distracting city full of restaurants and wine retailers. Like opera and classical music, wine would come to represent a world of almost limitless study, which appealed to her intellect. Unlike the works of Puccini, Mozart, and Brahms, however, she'd had little previous exposure to it.

"My parents now love wine, and they've learned a lot about it through me," she explained, "but when I was growing up, they would maybe have a dinner party once in a while. That was the only time that wine was in our house."

"There was something about wine that really interested me for some reason," which led her to explore continuing education options. She found a good one in Greenwich Village: a night wine class for amateurs at The New School. "I just wanted to learn a little bit more, so I signed up."

Ask any 10 wine professionals, from high-profile winemakers down to pavement-pounding sales representatives, and seven or eight of them will probably mention a specific bottle that opened their eyes to how exciting wine can be. For Conlin, the epiphany came with that New School class; it might as well have been written into the syllabus, such was the sway the learning experience had over her.

She recalled coming home with pages of notes on "the coolest thing I'd ever heard," the complex subject of wine. "It was all the stuff that I'd always wondered about, and I just said, 'There's so much here, I will never, ever be bored. Or not have something to keep learning about.'"

"Basically," she summed up, "I just changed careers."

For the dedication it took Conlin to get through a higher music education and onto some big New York stages, allowing wine to dictate a career left turn required an equal amount of passion. Restaurant management and wine retailing are far less glamorous than performing opera, at least to an outsider. She had to throw herself onto a completely different stage.

But she had a strategy. Following the New School, she enrolled at the respected International Wine Center in Midtown Manhattan, the first wine organization in the U.S. to offer Wine & Spirit Education Trust courses. (In another first, the IWC is run by Mary Ewing-Mulligan, a Master of Wine and the first American woman to earn the title.)

A consummate student, Conlin sailed through Ewing-Mulligan's instruction and earned the WSET Diploma credential, the traditional stepping-off qualification for students who plan to pursue the MW title.

In 2005, Conlin began a series of wine jobs in New York. "I worked at a number of different places," she said, from minimum wage retail on the Upper West Side to managing a Harlem wine bar, "mostly to just learn about wine and to be around it."

She spent some time working for a French importer and, in a perfect twist, served her first bottles of wine across the street from Lincoln Center at Cafe Fiorello, a neighborhood institution for the pre-symphony and opera crowd.

Exposure to the MW program was something she shared with a close friend, Mary Margaret McCamic, who became a Master of Wine in 2016. The pair started their IWC wine studies at the same time.

"In these wine classes, you sit next to a lot of people, and sometimes they're people you click with, and sometimes they're not," McCamic said recently over the phone. "Vanessa and I were kind of laughing at the same comments and making little comments to each other. And our friendship just kind of grew from there."

McCamic is a North Carolina native who swam competitively at UNC Chapel Hill and, like Conlin, pursued a graduate degree. She received a Master of Education



and for a brief period taught high school English before "intellectual curiosity," as she put it, led her to wine. Conlin's and her similar stories don't end with their academic achievements.

"Wine was sort of this bug that we all got and we just couldn't shake," she said. "Vanessa was very driven studying for the Master of Wine exam and is just an exceptionally talented opera singer. She was a very good performer and could handle stress under pressure. I was an athlete, a college swimmer. And so there's sort of this internal competitiveness and desire to learn more that drove us, I think, to work in wine ultimately."

As an MW, McCamic wears a number of hats in Napa Valley. She's a sales and education specialist who also imports high-end French Burgundy. Back in 2012, she started traveling to California for job interviews and would visit Conlin and her classical pianist husband, Curt Pajer, in Napa, where the couple had relocated in 2010.

"After living in New York, we wanted a total change of pace, and I really wanted to be close to the vineyards," Conlin said of the move west. "I decided that I absolutely had to be in Napa."

For his willingness to embrace California, the supportive Pajer was rewarded with a job as musical director in the opera department of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music where he still works today.

Conlin may be a former musician — and a student of both music and wine — but she is still a natural performer: tall, dark-haired, and vivacious, with an easy laugh that rounds out her stage presence and poise; she's rather *allegro con brio*, or "cheerful with great energy," like the fourth movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, one of her favorite pieces of mu-

**"I think there's much more of a sort of a competitive spirit in music. No one's going to ask, 'Hey, how did you sing that beautiful high C? Can you tell me?' But if you go to a winemaker and you say, 'How did you make that?' they'll tell you."**

Vanessa Conlin

sic — though she admitted that work "reduces me to tears every time."

Around their house, tears my flow occasionally for Beethoven, but Conlin noted that she's also a jazz fan and "a big classic rock person" who loves U2, Led Zeppelin and The Rolling Stones. "We listen to music non-stop," she said. "Of course, I grew up with classical music and, honestly, if Curt and I are going to listen to classical music at home, we stop everything and just sit and listen."

(As Queen's Freddie Mercury, that latter-day Oscar Wilde, told a rock journalist in 1977, "we break a lot of rules. It's unheard of to combine opera with a rock theme, my dear.")

Relating her music studies from years ago to the rigorous MW program, she pointed to differences and similarities. She was part of a tight-knit group of Napa Valley colleagues who comprised "this amazing tasting group" that gets together regularly on Sundays to taste and discuss wines. It was a contrast to her academic days in New York and Boston.

"To pursue music, there are definitely group activities. You know, you participate in courses, or you're in an opera or something, but so much of it is sitting alone by yourself in a practice room. And a lot of the MW is studying by yourself, too, but it also really requires you to kind of be out there, talking to people and learning."

"One of the things I love the most about the program is when you say you're studying for [the MW], people will be very open with you," she said. "I think there's much more of a sort of a competitive spirit in music. No one's going to ask, 'Hey, how did you sing that beautiful high C? Can you tell me?' But if you go to a winemaker and you say, 'How did you make that?' they'll tell you."

To apply to the Master of Wine program, Conlin needed the recommendation of an existing MW, whom she found in Peter Marks, the Napa-based vice president of Education for Constellation Brands. Marks is an industry veteran who earned the title in 1995 and has mentored or advised many wine students since then.

"Vanessa's there because she wants not only to better herself but be somebody who can help and contribute to the wine industry," he said recently at his office in south Napa. "Her ability to be both intellectual and artistic means she can see things from all angles. And wine, you know, it's an art and a skill. I think she's able to embody all of that very well."

Back in his acceptance year, Marks won the Institute of Masters of Wine's annual Bollinger Medal, awarded for the highest blind-tasting score in that portion of the exam. It was a feather that failed to find Conlin's cap in 2018. Her friend McCamic, who also won the Bollinger prize, nonetheless described her as "a fabulous taster" and a dedicated fellow student of wine.

"I think she saw how much I enjoyed the process," McCamic said of her friend. "And other people she knew, of course. There were so many other MWs, I'm sure, who influenced her decision. But I know for a fact that she saw how much I enjoyed it, and I think she just wasn't ready to be done studying."

At this point, with the grueling MW exams behind her, Conlin's studies are two-thirds complete. That last hurdle of a research paper is her academic preoccupation these days, but occasionally it has to give way to her position at Wine Access (and probably vice-versa).

Recently, on an extended work trip to Bordeaux, she spent a couple of weeks making selections for Wine Access to sell via their website. The Cabernet-based wines of the chateaux she visited may have reminded her of Oakville or Stags Leap. Conlin has certainly developed the palate and expertise over the last 15 years to differentiate between the world's two great Cabernet regions, and that's just scratching the surface of her knowledge. In wine, as with music before it, she shows mastery.

# Eduardo

From C1

We tasted three products that were unique and worth seeking. One was the

'Single Estate' Source One Vodka. You could say this is the flagship of the distillery, made of 100 percent oats grown and processed in the ranch. The result — an earthy and herbal vodka

with creaminess and a generous profile.

The Juniper Grove Gin, in a London Dry style, exploded with layers of cedar, juniper, lemon and lime peel and a lively peppery

note that reminded me of fresh baby arugula.

The third of the lineup was an Oloroso Sherry Cask aged vodka, a one-of-a-kind spirit, rested in the cask for one month. This baby delivered the goods, spice, caramel and layers of toast with a creamy and bold texture.

As part of the program, we experienced a Cocktail Class by world-renowned Mixologist Tony Abou-Ganim, author of "The Modern Mixologist: Contemporary Classic Cocktails" and others. The seminar was enlightening

with some simple, but easily overlooked, tips on stirring, shaking and serving cocktails like stirring 20 times in each direction when making a martini.

"It's the little things that add up to make a great cocktail," Tony said. Of course, the results were delicious. I got to experience one of the best and most balanced gimlets I've had simply made with the Juniper Grove Gin, lime and simple syrup. It's all about the right ingredients and technique.

The Bently Family not only focuses their efforts

on the beverage world, but their operations also include growing organic and antibiotic-free beef that is found at multiple stores, including Whole Foods. They also grow garlic and hay as part of the operation.

Bently Heritage Distillery founder by Christopher and Camille Bently marks the continued efforts of the Bently family in Minden. They've also managed to create a team of experts to oversee the operation from the ground up. A team of 6 distillers is backed up by experts like Matthew Drew, "The Malt Master," Jeff Hodson, an industry veteran who is director of sales, and Jason Tollman, who's worked for companies like Nestle/PowerBar and Starbucks, to name a few, serves as general manager.

Next time you encounter one of their spirits at your favorite bar or liquor store, keep in mind all aspects of production from the organic farming to the time their spirits are bottled. And do stop by the Bently Heritage Distillery on your next road trip.

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