

## A WINEMAKER'S WONDERINGS

# KNOW AND LEARN

BY JAMES CHRISTOPHER TRACY

If you were to wander over to the second floor of Chancellor's Hall on Stony Brook University's Southampton campus this past spring you would have found me and a classroom of 23 eager students tasting and learning about wine. Recently, as one more sign that the East End's wine industry is maturing, Stony Brook's Center for Wine, Food, and Culture became an approved program provider of classes offered by the Wine and Spirits Education Trust, the British-based organization recognized worldwide as the preeminent wine and spirits educational program. I had the honor of teaching the class.

The folks who attended the classes were there for both business and pleasure, and included employees of local restaurants like the Laundry, wine stores like Race Lane and Cellar Merchants, wineries like Martha Clara and Channing Daughters, distributors like Atlantic Wine and Spirits and trade organizations like the Long Island Wine Council. There were culinary students, lawyers, filmmakers, scientists and many others, all sharing a desire to learn and know more about wine.

Why would someone submit to this intensive nine-week course culminating in a final exam? While wine is about deliciousness and pleasure, increased wine knowledge leads to deeper understanding, which produces greater clarity when talking about wine. And also, very importantly, it leads to a broader and more intense pleasure and a better ability to share it with others. Imagine how difficult it would be to appreciate Shakespeare without a solid understanding of the English language and concepts like irony and iambic pentameter. With wine, as with any complex, multidisciplinary subject, the more you learn—you realize the less you know.

Humility is important, and not just for wine drinkers. The best wines are made by restless producers who are constantly engaged in learning and tasting the wines of the world. All too often wine-industry people are plagued with something called "cellar palate." It happens when you get stuck in the rut of drinking your own wine or your neighbor's almost exclusively, and you lose track of all that the greater wine world holds. It is unlikely I would have made and had success with skin-fermented white wines like Envelope and Meditazione without sampling and studying similar wines of Gravner, Radikon, La Castellada and others working on the borders of Italy and Slovenia. (Extended contact with the grape skin means greater aroma, flavor and color than most white wines.)



In this, the Intermediate Certificate class, we focus on the six factors that affect the style, quality and price of wine: climate, grape variety, soil, weather, viticulture (how the vines are grown) and vinification (how the wine is made). We taste wines like Raphael's 2002 Merlot from the North Fork of Long Island, Chateau de Fonbel 2005 from Saint-Emilion and Simi 2003 Merlot from Sonoma County and discuss how those six factors are expressed in the individual wines. In another class, we discussed how wine's body, acid, alcohol, flavors, sweetness (or lack of) affected wine pairing with particular foods. We tasted two Channing Daughters Chardonnays of opposite styles: one fresh and unoaked, the other rich, wild and oaky and talked about how they both might pair with local lobster and drawn butter. The fresh unoaked wine would contrast and cut through the dish's rich flavors; the oaked wine would match that richness and offer a more sumptuous pairing. One student asked why the staff of restaurants rarely talked with their customers about some of these aspects of food and wine matches. Partly, I responded, it was because people lacked the skills and confidence to understand, evaluate and communicate these factors and make recommendations, so the experience of both restaurateur and restaurant guest suffer.

However, classroom education is not for everyone, and while I believe the rigor and discipline of formal training is invaluable, the truly priceless (and pricey) education is gained through tasting and experience. So take advantage of our local wine region and the resources of the New York metropolitan area, the world's biggest and most important wine market. Visit our wineries and taste broadly and often. Ask lots of questions and step outside of your comfort zone. You begin to understand what you like and why and can appreciate what you don't. This is when you learn. 🍷

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