

WINE EXPERT BORN WITH A TASTE FOR GRAPES

BevMo Cellarmaster Wilfred Wong championed California wines in the 1970s

By Jessica Yadegaran
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Most cubicles are littered with pens and Post-Its. Wilfred Wong's houses memories and cultural shifts that document three decades of wine evaluation.

Wong, the cellarmaster for Beverages & More, has a work space that opens to a tasting room filled with Riedel stemware and hundreds of bottles awaiting his critical palate. He tastes 8,000 a year, and almost half end up on the shelves of BevMo, the largest specialty beverage retailer in California.

The self-described "extreme researcher" not only rates and writes thousands of wine reviews for the chain's 80 stores, he helps develop dozens of exclusive BevMo blends, judges 20 wine competitions a year and travels the world's regions in search of great juice.

Many large-scale wine buyers interact with sales managers or rely on secondhand research. BevMo benefits from Wong's personal relationships in the industry and a knowledge base he's culled over 35 years. And in an age of faceless, big-business wine, it helps separate BevMo from other box stores. When Wong joined the chain in 1995, BevMo had six stores. Today, there are 80.

"It's amazing to me that someone with the name Wong is so well-known in Bordeaux," says David Richards, Wong's boss and executive vice president of BevMo. "They welcome him with open arms because they know he's dedicated to his craft. He's like a painter of pictures, except he does it with his ability to taste."

Moreover, Wong is able to discuss wine with anyone without "making them feel stupid," Richards says. "Wilfred can hold his ground with a connoisseur, but he can also understand the hobbyist and the person who's just trying a bottle for the first time."

This makes Wong, 57, a bit of an anomaly among high-powered wine critics such as Robert Parker, whose affinity for high-octane wines tends to dictate the marketplace. Wong is light-hearted, approachable and has an almost childlike crush on the grape.

"One thing I do is reward for concept of wine," Wong explains. "He (Parker) is more on an absolute scale. If there is a fruit-forward Cabernet Sauvignon meant to be drunk now, why not reward it? For what it is, it's perfect."

It's this fresh outlook that has won Wong respect and admiration in the industry.

"He looks at the whole experience and context of the wine," says Ondine Chattan, director of winemaking for Geyser Peak Winery and a friend of Wong's. "A lot of critics

and winemakers start out looking for the flaws. He's the opposite. He's always looking at what's there, what's good about it."

Like most professional tasters, Wong rates on a 100-point scale, looking for the classic characteristics of a variety -- flavors, tannins, acidity and structure -- and has a consistent standard of comparison in his head. In a given day, Wong can consider up to 250 wines. He's blessed with good health and mental clarity and has never had a day so bad he couldn't taste or judge, he says.

However, a few years ago, a nasty virus ravaged Wong's upper-respiratory system, and for months his sense of smell was at about 80 percent. Three doctors and several decongestants later, the problem passed.

"I relied more on my palate," he says. "You have to be able to perform under off circumstances."

Before he became the face of BevMo, Wong was a pioneer in the San Francisco wine scene in the 1970s, hunting the state for great wines and developing the program at his parents' grocery store, Ashbury Market, into one of the country's best, long before supermarkets carried much of anything beyond jugs of Carlo Rossi.

Wong got his hands on some of the first vintages of Caymus, Stag's Leap and Clos Du Val, wineries that later cemented California's place in the international scene. He recalls selling the 1973 Caymus Cabernet Sauvignon -- today, the stuff of legends -- for \$6 a bottle. Ashbury Market was also the first to carry Kistler, undeniably one of the world's finest winemaking estates.

"Nobody had these wines or knew what they were," Wong recalls. "But they were in a hole in the wall run by Chinese immigrants."

Wong's parents, Jane and Walter, immigrated to San Francisco and purchased Ashbury Market in 1956. Wong grew up in the Haight and worked in the store as a teenager. He attended UC Berkeley, where he studied psychology and left five units shy of a degree to buy wine for the shop full time after he tasted a 1968 BV Burgundy at a relative's house. The wine seduced him.

"That hit my taste buds and my intellect at the same time," he says.

He dug through library stacks searching for literature on wine, but it was scarce, he says. So he educated himself and had a few famed teachers: The critic and gourmand, Robert Finigan, held tastings in his girlfriend's apartment, which was three blocks from Ashbury Market. There, Wong tasted Chalone Estate Pinot Noir, then a rare, cult wine, for the first time.

In 1983, Wong became general manager of the store and bought wine there for a decade before answering BevMo's call in 1995.

When he's not tasting wine, Wong lives for Sundays spent running errands and cooking with his wife, Alice, and their Husky-mix, Cody. He is an avid writer and photographer and believes wine has fulfilled a need in him for expression. Before he found wine, he used to be quite shy, he says.

"The subject can carry me away," he says. "I can be in a vineyard for hours and be content. You absorb things -- the soil, the vines -- and feel like you're in touch with yourself."

biography

- AGE: 57
- RESIDENCE: San Francisco
- BIRTHPLACE: San Francisco
- FAMILY: Wife, Alice
- EDUCATION: Five units shy of a B.S. in Psychology, UC Berkeley
- CLAIM TO FAME: The face of Beverages & More, California's largest specialty beverage retailer

wong on wine

- What he drinks: Reds. "I like Napa Cabernets and Pinots from the Willamette Valley or Sonoma Coast. Pinot is ideal with food, but Cab is more dependable."
- The next big thing: Two-varietal blends, like Cabernet-Shiraz. "They're different and affordable." Also, Pinot Gris. "It has lots of styles that are perfect with a wide variety of food matchings and occasions."
- The future wine consumer: Millennials (those who turned 21 in 2000 or after). "They are a wise and informed group but different than Gen X or baby boomers. They are exposed to wine and enjoy it, but it's not the end-all-be-all to life. It's part of it."
- What Millennials drink: "Canned-soup production wines, dependable commercial wines lacking pretension that cost \$14-\$20. The wines in this range are delicious and eclectic and easy to find and well-made."
- The biggest threat to wine: Global warming. "Many producers tell me their wines have changed in the past 10 years. They're hotter (higher in alcohol) because of the shorter harvesting time. In 20 or 30 years, producers won't be able to grow the grapes they need or yield the quality of fruit they're used to because it will be like a desert."
- His 100-point wines: There have been two. A 1990 Montrachet from Ramonet. "So concentrated, yet elegant, and that's rare." The other: a 1997 Opus One. "Extraordinary balance and finesse. It was quite a moment."
- Wong as winemaker: Wong made his own wine in 1985. With a friend, they rented a press and bought a used American oak barrel and made five cases of Carneros Cabernet. "It was pretty fun," he says. "It was a light Cab with soft tannins." His rating? "If it got 70 points, it'd be lucky."