

## WOMEN AND WINE - A TIPPING POINT



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I have often been asked what life has been like for me as a woman in what has traditionally been seen as a man's world. In one word: cushy.

I remember once in the early 1980s being asked patronisingly at a (non-professional) wine tasting, 'I say, do you come to these things to taste for your boss?' When I started out as a wine-trade writer in the late 1970s I was conscious of a few looks exchanged between old hands in the wine trade at my hippie clothes and hair. And I remember the late [Michael Broadbent](#) of Christie's complaining that I was a 'a bit women's lib'.

But as a woman I'd be put next to the host or significant visitor at wine-trade lunches and got the story, while the man from the rival publication was at the other end of the table. Being female was a factor in being chosen to present the world's first TV series about wine, Channel 4's *The Wine Programme*. And when many of the national newspaper wine-columnist slots happened to be occupied by women, also in the 1980s, we all benefited from a rash of articles about how clever we were. If they were condescending, I didn't notice it.

But suddenly, in the last month or two, I wonder whether I have not been suffering all these years from a serious case of not noticing. I was certainly aware in the UK wine trade of the late 20th century that women did most of the hard work but were rarely given any power or credit. However, when in the 21st

century women took over at the helm of several important wine companies, I thought that was a sign of a battle won, in the country I live in anyway.

But I was wrong. On 12 October Amber Gardner (pictured above), with a long list of sommelier positions including most recently at Claridge's super-smart restaurant Davies & Brook, posted on the trade website *The Buyer* a brave, beautifully written, despairing [article](#) in which she drew attention to instances of sexual harassment in her work. 'I realise that I am not, and never will be, part of the inner club of wine - the boys' club - that still dominates the wine industry', she concludes, while calling for a new deal for women in the hospitality industry whereby they could be open about their experiences instead of shrugging them off as the price to be paid for advancement. Women (all with similar experiences) outnumbered men in responses to her article eight to one.

The month before, Vinka Woldarsky, a Chilean Canadian working and studying wine tourism in Spain, wrote a long - very long - post on her blog [Bottled Bliss](#) about the casual sexism woven into Spanish male wine culture as seen through a North American female lens. She followed it up with two more articles in the same vein, one of which was taken down after a cease and desist request on behalf of one of the objects of her scorn. He had circulated some particularly vicious references to UK wine-scene characters which traumatised several of the younger women targets in particular.

But the real bombshell has been in the United States. At the end of last month the *New York Times* published [an exposé](#) of how well-placed men in the Americas chapter of the Court of Master Sommeliers, who administer the extremely exacting exams for aspiring wine waiters of both sexes, preyed on ambitious young women, some of whom dared not rebuff their advances for fear of jeopardising their careers.

Unlike the Master of Wine qualification, which is based on anonymised exam papers, the letters MS can be acquired only via a series of in-person tests administered by senior MS exam proctors. A total of 21 young women recounted their experiences in the article and a number of Master Sommeliers have either resigned or been suspended.

(The Americas chapter of the Court of Master Sommeliers was already under fire for its tardy and inept response to the Black Lives Matter campaign, and for its silence over a serious misdemeanour by an MS exam proctor that resulted in 23 recently qualified MSs [having their qualifications withdrawn](#) in 2018.)

Doubtless there are instances of predatory men in many other fields but the hierarchical nature of the American hospitality industry, in which everyone is chasing similar jobs in a tight-knit world, readily lends itself to such behaviour - just as the absolute power wielded by Harvey Weinstein in Hollywood did.

What is clear is that we have reached a tipping point in the way women are treated in the wine world. Women of my generation may just have turned the other cheek but those in their twenties and thirties considering a career in wine need to feel there is a safe pathway into it and, importantly in the age of social media, can create a public fuss if they don't.

As Vinka Woldarsky wrote in a long email to me describing the reaction to her posts, 'While I admire the women who have worked hard and no doubt had to put up with all sorts of things, by telling us to ignore the noise or work harder they are passing onto us outdated beliefs that no longer fit this new generation of women in wine.'

Many men and some women argue that all this is ridiculous over-sensitivity. Even if it were (and I don't think anyone under 40 would agree) there is a pragmatic reason for reacting seriously to this issue: the fragile state of the world's wine trade. For the first time in my working life wine sales are contracting in its major markets, not just in France, Spain and Italy where they have been plummeting for years, but in both the US and the UK where not so long ago demand for wine seemed unstoppable.

A major reason for this seems to be that young people feel more disaffected by wine than ever. Cocktails, craft beer and spirits, and abstinence, have all been more successful than wine in attracting younger potential drinkers in the last few years. This is not the place to dissect the reasons for this but it is clear that for the world's wine industry to prosper it needs to be much more inclusive.



I have written already about the need to broaden the appeal of both the drink and the industry to [far more ethnic groups](#), but if half of the young people who might potentially work in wine do not find the wine business welcoming and safe, then all of us wine professionals will be in even more serious trouble.

As 28-year-old Dallas wine director Madeleine Thompson remarked in the *NY Times* article, 'We need more people of all kinds to love wine. [White Claw](#) is going to eat us all if we don't change.'

## Women winemakers

I have long maintained that there is no qualitative difference between the relatively few wines that are made by women and the rest but, in a recent online discussion of the role of women in South African wine, winemaker Samantha O'Keefe of Lismore persuaded me that women's proven superior tasting sensitivity affects the minutiae of her winemaking decisions and results in a substantive difference from the less subtle way her male counterparts make wine. Yours to decide. This is an extremely partial list of female winemakers whose work I admire.

[Lalou Bize-Leroy](#), Domaine Leroy, Burgundy

[Brigitte Chevalier](#), Domaine de Cébène, Languedoc

[Cathy Corison](#), Napa Valley

[Vanya Cullen](#), Cullen, Western Australia

[Véronique Drouhin](#), Burgundy and Oregon

[Elisabetta Foradori](#), Foradori, Trentino, Italy

[Eva Fricke](#), Germany

[Sandrine Garbay](#), Ch d'Yquem, Bordeaux

[Hélène Génin](#), Ch Latour, Bordeaux

[Sybille Kuntz](#), Germany

[Anne Le Naour](#), Chx Meyney and Grand-Puy-Ducasse, Bordeaux

[Bérénice Lurton](#), Ch Climens, Bordeaux

[Mesdames Mugnier](#), Dom Georges Mugnier-Gibourg, Burgundy

[Andrea Mullineux](#), Mullineux and Leeu Passant, South Africa

[Samantha O'Keefe](#), Lismore, South Africa

[Sara Pérez](#), Mas Martinet, Spain

[Louisa Rose](#), Yalumba, South Australia

[Heidi Schröck](#), Austria

[Diana Snowden](#), Domaine Dujac, Burgundy and Snowden Vineyards, Napa Valley

[Cherie Spriggs](#), Nyetimber, England

[Sandra Tavares da Silva](#), Wine & Soul, Portugal

[Cécile Tremblay](#), Burgundy

[Pauline Vauthier](#), Ch Ausone, Bordeaux

[Virginia Willcock](#), Vasse Felix, Western Australia

*Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com.*