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WINE and Corporate Conferences

WELL-PLANNED TASTINGS ARE GROWING IN POPULARITY

BY DOC LAWRENCE

Wine tastings have arrived. Moving from Napa across the country, they are part of modern lifestyles and corporate culture, increasingly popular at conferences and retreats. Tastings and their romantic wine dinner progeny are part of the corporate landscape and offer many benefits for participants. While wine tastings have won favor with meeting planners, they require careful consideration and thorough research to ensure truly meaningful and successful events.

Why plan for a wine tasting, something that on its face might seem within a company's internal capability? The answers gleaned from a diverse group of experts — and all warn against non-professional, improvised tastings — provide some fundamental guidelines that will prove valuable in determining all aspects of your wine tasting and the best way to assure a roaring success.

Remember the days of the two-martini lunch? Now, that's a bad memory and a business taboo. Just a few years ago, a corporate wine tasting, if it was ever considered, was in the context of something for the women to do while their executive spouses played golf. That has all changed.

"Wine consumption nationally the past year is up over five percent," observes Jan Stuebing, director of the Australian Wine Bureau in New York. Tastings, whether at a local restaurant or major prestigious venue events with big name winemakers, are, she maintains, "about as democratic and free from gender division as anything today. The guys love wine as much as the ladies." Stuebing, a member of Les Dames d'Escoffier, has conducted wine tastings throughout the country while introducing Australia's wines, including MBA classes at Duke, Georgetown and other universities. "These provide ambitious future CEO's some

wine sophistication they will find quite useful."

Edward Maddox is the sommelier at The Peabody Orlando and without equivocation states that wine tastings and wine dinners "are just beginning to really take off." His opinion comes from experience in planning and conducting them in the luxury hotel across the street from the Orlando Convention Center. "We have the exceptional staff to truly make this a meaningful affair," he says. "What a tasting should confer is a real benefit to each participant and we believe that to make that happen requires wine and food experts."

Other Florida destinations have wine programs in place for corporate guests including the historic Breakers Palm Beach and The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island. The Breakers' wine maven Virginia Phillip, a former sommelier of the year and an internationally respected wine professional, has a trained staff that attracts some of the country's most highly regarded wine events along with more intimate tastings. "We host corporate wine tastings for groups as small as eight and set a ceiling at 30 participants. We exclusively use Riedel stemware and our most popular tastings are the wines of California, Oregon and Washington."

John Pugliese, The Ritz-Carlton Amelia Island sommelier, views corporate wine tastings as "definitely on the increase" and begins his own variation with a glass of dry rose champagne or sparkling wine. "It's a good start to demonstrate that what is pink isn't necessarily sweet," he says, adding that this provides a launch for an entertaining wine flight, and "dispels the myth that Champagne shouldn't be enjoyed by men."

Many executives entertain at restaurants where deals are negotiated. "How you read a wine list, determine value and quality, and select wines that really fit with what everyone

Opposite page, clockwise from top right: Grapes from Fredericksburg, Texas; wine tasting at Château Élan, outside Atlanta; Robert Mondavi hosts a wine tasting class at Sea Island; Château Élan vineyards.



Karen Bremer of Atlanta's City Grill (above left); Three Sisters Winery, Dahlonega, Ga.

is ordering," Pugliese says, "speaks volumes about your sophistication and the way you handle money."

Many elements combine to make a meritorious wine tasting. Obviously, there are some very tangible and lasting benefits for those attending. But, there are some particulars to weigh beforehand. For instance, do you want a wine tasting in the same building as the conference or meeting? Getting away to another place, many say, brings as much joy as an outing.

"The corporate gathering is a perfect place for education. ... I teach them how to taste and enjoy all wines with food, and participants pick up some useful social and buying skills."

— Michaela Rodeno, CEO, St. Supery Vineyards & Winery

Many restaurants are well equipped for a wine tasting, having in place a well-developed wine and food program. One of the best is Atlanta's City Grill, founded and owned by epicurean pioneer Karen Bremer. Bremer's elegant, mansion-like facility in the historic Hurt Building has wine tastings every third Wednesday, which many conventioners and conference visitors join. "We have in place a unique wine tasting, a gathering, that is accessible with just a reservation and attendance. It's a one-of-a-kind offering featuring wines of the world at a high level of enjoyment and education." This year, City Grill features 12 different tastings with varietal comparisons of wines ranging from Argentina's Malbec to the great red wine from Burgundy and Oregon, Pinot Noir.

Atlanta's Villa Christina regularly hosts both wine tastings and dinners. The multipurpose facility is close to numerous hotel and conference centers and, according to general manager Adam Ghali, is geared to corporate wine events. He cites ones held there by companies like St. Joseph's Hospital and Pfizer. After the initial contact by an interested corporation, Ghali meets with the company representative and, together with his executive chef, selects the appropriate wines and food. "We have the wine availability and the experience designed and tailored for corporate needs."

Few in the country have the wine and food experience of Barbara Werley, now at The Homestead in Virginia after a solid stint as sommelier at Caesar's Palace. Werley, the fourth woman in the United States to be admitted to the Court of Master Sommelier, also holds a degree from the Culinary Institute of America. She views wine tastings as "my opportunity to educate while making wine fun and relevant in everyday living." Werley regularly works with corporate offices planning wine events, particularly tastings. "I like to introduce the corporate participants to wines that aren't household names, but are delicious and food friendly," she says. "Just because we can't pronounce the name on a label doesn't mean we should dismiss it. As we experience how much better food will taste properly paired with wine, we become transformed and elevated."

Werley believes that varietal and style comparisons are vital and she typically presents a progression from bubbly Champagne to light and more complex whites into gentle then bold reds, with a mixture of old and new world styles to accomplish the most rewarding experience.



Virginia Phillip of The Breakers (above left) says corporate wine tastings are popular; St. Supery CEO Michaela Rodeno (above center) has been at the forefront of corporate tastings, long advancing the idea that they combine education and relaxation, and enhance important social skills. The Homestead resort's Barbara Werley (above right) is a longtime advocate for more wine events as part of corporate meetings.

Mark Shook is the executive chef at Charlotte's historic Duke Mansion, a prominent North Carolina landmark regularly offering both wine tastings and dinners. "It's the norm for a group to come here from another location," he says. "A tasting or dinner is a special service we've refined, and the environment and professional staff here almost guarantee a memorable event."

With four full-time certified sommeliers, Georgia's renowned Sea Island Resort is a standard bearer for upper-end wine tastings.

Mark Scharhag, who heads sales for Sea Island, says a corporate wine tasting requires quality leadership from beginning to end, and offers tastings at The Lodge "from the wine 101 level to the very advanced." Scharhag

describes a typical tasting as one that "would include several old world and new world Chardonnays and would proceed to Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa compared with Bordeaux relatives." All wines are served in crystal stemware.

Winemakers and credentialed sommeliers are quite willing to come to an event at a location that has meeting facilities lacking a wine staff and cellar. Shelton Vineyards, located in the North Carolina wine producing Yadkin Valley, has gone as far south as the Fieldstone Resort in Georgia's Blue Ridge Mountains to conduct a private wine tasting. Likewise, Three Sisters Winery co-owner

Doug Paul conducts tastings both at his magnificent complex near Dahlonega, Ga., and on the road. Paul has a palatial but functional tent for outdoor tastings and a luxurious lodge for indoors. Three Sisters has taken to the road to conduct tastings at Brasstown Valley Resort in Young Harris, Ga., and at private locations in Atlanta and other cities, and offers a complete corporate tasting package.

Chateau Élan outside Atlanta is an established veteran for corporate wine tastings and dinners. With a staff headed by esteemed winemaker Dan Baldwin and Executive Chef Joseph Truex, the award-winning resort combines its wines and gourmet restaurant with luxury conference accommodations that has few equals outside California.

Resourceful wineries in Napa have identified corporate wine events as a lucrative market. One is St. Supery Vineyards & Winery whose CEO, Michaela Rodeno, the unofficial leader of the "have wine will travel" fraternity, has conducted corporate wine events "in every state except the Dakotas." The idea for off-winery tastings was spawned, she says, from the influx of more than 70,000 winery visitors annually. "Early on we recognized this as our new direct marketing effort we could take to the entire country," Rodeno says. "The corporate gathering is a perfect place for education. We bring our superior wines, I teach them how to taste and enjoy all wines with food, and participants pick up some useful social and buying skills. A few discover a new hobby."

The name of the crystal stemware used is not as important as the quality of the glass and its suitability for what is being poured, according to Barbara Werley. "The design," she

"[Wine tastings and wine dinners] are just beginning to really take off."

— *Sommelier Edward Maddox,
The Peabody Orlando*



Doc Lawrence is a noted wine and food columnist, wine lecturer and consultant. He is currently co-authoring Real Wine for Real People with Master Sommelier Barbara Werley, producing a television pilot series, "Forks and Corks," and is the 2005 National Chairman, Food and Beverage Section, Public Relations Society of America in New York. Lawrence divides his time between Atlanta and Fort Lauderdale.

maintains, "takes into consideration the olfactory process and will determine if a tasting is superficial or meaningful." Without exception, every sommelier, chef, wine director and winery producer concurs. If you smell detergent, notice that every glass is identical regardless of whether Bordeaux or Champagne is being poured, or the wine is served in plastic, revisit your contract. Such disasters, unfortunately all too common, are easily avoided by using known wine professionals who appreciate the importance of high standards in every step of planning and executing a wine tasting.

There are some established wine-tasting guidelines. Begin by engaging a respected, credentialed wine professional. Business and professional ethics are paramount considerations. Fortunately, most sommeliers maintain high moral and ethical standards and you can confidently delegate to them wine selections and pairings.

Be certain your facilities are appropriate and comfortable. Temperature is critical and outdoor tastings in summer heat are problematic. Tastings are successful when everyone is comfortable and that requires chairs and tables.

Planning the wine tasting for a conference includes finding a suitable location, choosing the tasting conductor and selecting a variety of wines and accompanying food. Crystal stemware is always a desirable option. Why does a Bordeaux or Cabernet Sauvignon glass have a big bowl? What stemware is appropriate for other varietals and styles? These are stimulating discussion topics for a tasting.

The tasting environment should never suggest a teacher-student relationship. You want informality, a cheerful, fun-filled room and lots of questions, interaction and laughter. Provide bottles of good water. This refreshes the palate between sips of different wines and has no equal as a thirst quencher.

If you are having your tasting or wine dinner in a hotel, restaurant or resort, the facility will have the staff you need. With a conference center location, have your wine professional take charge of the wine and food from selection through purchase. They will make or break the tasting experience for the beginner as well as the experienced wine aficionado.

The overriding principle to keep in mind is that if the wine tasting combines education with improved social skills and is fun, you will likely have a demand to make them a regular part of future corporate gatherings. ❧

WINE TASTING CHECKLIST:

- Go off premises, if possible — unless your meeting is in a luxury hotel or resort. Give it the feel of an excursion or an outing.
- Before you do anything, consult with a credentialed wine professional who has vast experience with sophisticated business people. Plan the tasting or wine dinner from A to Z with them.
- Keep the group manageable. Most wine professionals suggest between 20 and 30 for a tasting and no more than 50 for a wine dinner. Intimacy is very important.
- Consider using the wine tasting as a reward, some recognition for those who have earned it.
- Have the wines printed on a tasting menu, providing the name of the wine professional conducting the event, and a description of the wines plus the date and location. Many have the conductor sign this for framing.
- For an extra touch, have a special wine glass engraved with the date and place as a memento. Chances are it will find a place in each participant's home and bring back treasured memories.
- A bottle of not-so-common wine that was part of the tasting, signed and dated by the wine conductor makes a wonderful gift — but only if it is in an attractive container.
- Remember: Wine is not just delicious; it's fun to drink and will always prompt questions, comments and laughter. Fun is the objective at all wine events. Be certain the event conductor understands that and encourages everyone to be relaxed. Wine education comes naturally. This is not a college course. There are no grades.
- Prepare afterwards for your next wine tasting. Maybe this one could be centered on Champagne and sparkling wines. The next, wines from the South of France. Or Australia. Anything goes!

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