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A Space to Build Community

BY LORIS JONES-RANDOLPH

In February, the Court of Master Sommeliers, Americas, hosted its inaugural Women's Sommelier Symposium in collaboration with the Santa Barbara County Vintners Association. I was overwhelmingly excited to participate and engage with my peers in the field, including sommeliers, winemakers, and other industry leaders, for a weekend.

On our first day, we checked into the Santa Ynez Valley Marriott and received a lovely welcome gift from the trip sponsors: Coravin provided us with a special Lunar New Year edition of its namesake device equipped with an aerator as well as custom screwcaps, while Nielson and Diatom provided wines on which we could quickly test out our gadgets. Downstairs, we attended a quick reception featuring Loubud's delicious sparkling rosé before heading to Roblar Winery in Santa Ynez.

Indicating Roblar's biodynamic practices, the sight of grazing sheep in its vineyards caught the group's attention right away. In the winery, we tasted the producer's pét-nat as well as a Viognier and cool-climate Syrah that everyone loved. Then we headed to dinner, which kicked off with speeches by several female winemakers from across Santa Barbara County. It was world-altering

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to be ushered into the same room as Master Sommeliers Madeline Triffon and Laura DePasquale, the latter of whom proctored my recent Certified Examination and who encouraged me and the other two women I passed with to continue our journeys.

The next day, multiple panels were intertwined with winery visits and tastings. We headed first to the women-run Cambria winery, where we explored the subject of barrels, from differences in toast level to aging techniques, and the topic of navigating a male-dominated industry. Panelists like self-funded winemaker Brit Zotovich, wine and media professional Julia Coney, and Master Sommelier Andrea Robinson gave us insights at a level that is unfortunately not so often shared.

Fess Parker was our next stop, where we attended a women-led panel on sustainability in wine and the future of farming. Going beyond organic certifications, regenerative farming takes into account the social responsibility of wineries: Santa Barbara County producers like Foxen as well as Fess Parker and Cambria have been among the first to provide health insurance, mobile health-care units, and 401ks to workers. To treat the vineyard as a place for equity is to truly tap into the things a new generation of wine drinkers holds as values for themselves and the brands they engage with. After the seminar, we headed to Presqu'île for an amazing meal. Enologist Anna Murphy paired the local bounty that was served with the producer's Chardonnay, Syrah, and Pinot Noir, making for an experience many of us are still dreaming about.

On our final day, we visited the legendary Foley Estates. While feeling the effects of the Santa Barbara winds, we had the pleasure of experiencing a workshop on structure, in which the Foley team demonstrated variations in alcohol, tannins, acid, and texture. Next, we attended a workshop led by female négociants from Santa Barbara County and were able to taste through their wines before heading to dinner at famed restaurant Pico in Los Alamos. Illustrating the adage "what grows together goes together," the seven-course meal showcased produce and proteins from the chef's own backyard that blew us all away as Lane Tanner spoke to us about her Lumen wines.

The Women's Sommelier Symposium was a space not only to network and learn but to build community and to find your place within the wine world. I found more sisters and aunts and mothers on this trip than I have in a long time, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to connect with them—and to share that with others looking for the same.

Loris Jones-Randolph is a sommelier at the Intercontinental Hotel Group in Los Angeles, CA.



Emily Wines, MS, served as host of the Women's Sommelier Symposium.



Madeline Triffon, MS, looks on during a tasting at Foley Estates.