

Beverage Journal

SEPTEMBER 2025

SHARPEN YOUR SKILLS

FINANCIAL FUNDAMENTALS AND ADVANCED BLIND TASTING
TIPS FOR BEVERAGE PROS TO KICK OFF THE FALL





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FALL FORWARD, CHEERS TO LOCAL

I know it still feels like summer. The patio's busy, the coolers are stocked with seltzers, and there's probably still a case of sunscreen behind the bar from your last outdoor event. But here's the thing, fall is coming fast, and in this business, the folks who get ready early are the ones who get ahead.

If you wait until the first chilly night to think about tailgate specials, Oktoberfest beers, or hot cocktail menus, you've already missed the sweet spot. The seasonal curve is like a wave, you either catch it early or spend the rest of the ride paddling to catch up.

Now's the time to start making those calls to your reps, updating your menus, and locking in orders for the things you know you'll need. We've all seen how "just in time" ordering can turn into "out of stock" in a heartbeat.

And while you're at it, don't forget one of the best tools you have for standing out this fall: local flavor. September is harvest season here in Maryland and in our neighboring states. Breweries are rolling out small-batch Oktoberfest lagers and fresh-hop IPAs. Cideries are pressing apples for this year's blends. Wineries are bottling limited runs, and some of our distilleries are even releasing fall spice and seasonal whiskeys.

Featuring these products isn't just about being trendy, it's about telling a story your guests can't hear anywhere else. A pint of local beer next to your crab dip? That's a taste of Maryland. A flight of local ciders with your charcuterie board? That's an experience. Hosting a "Meet the Maker" night



with a local distiller? That's the kind of event people talk about and post on social media.

Of course, the shift into cooler months isn't just about the menu, it's about the atmosphere, too. As patio season winds down, think about how you'll keep guests comfortable when the air gets crisp. Will you bring in patio heaters to stretch the season? Offer blankets for outdoor seating? Transition your cocktail list to feature warm drinks like mulled wine, hot buttered rum, or Irish coffee? Those little touches can make the difference between an empty table and a group that stays for another round.

The trick is to do the math now. Energy costs, equipment rentals, even the extra garnishes for those cozy cocktails, these can all eat into profits if you don't plan for them. Build them into your fall strategy so you're boosting sales instead of watching margins shrink.

The beauty of this season is that it's full of opportunities to connect through local partnerships, seasonal flavors, and the kind of warm hospitality that makes customers feel welcome no matter the temperature.

So, while the weather still says "summer," plan for fall now. Stock what you need, train your staff, think about comfort, and work in some local harvest flavor to your lineup. You'll be glad you did when the leaves start turning and your customers are already lining up for what you've got.

Here's to a profitable season ahead.
Cheers! ■

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1. LAPHROAIG

Laphroaig's annual Càirdeas release has arrived stateside. The 119.2-proof Lore Cask Strength first launched in Scotland in May to aptly coincide with the Islay whisky festival Fèis Ile. It opens with peat aromas, morphing into bright notes of lemon zest, fresh mint, and cumin.

\$ SRP: \$110 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 laphroaig.com

2. KHK WINES

Currently poured by the glass at fine-dining establishments around the country, the 2023 Cabernet Sauvignon from KHK Wines is making waves for its lush, velvety texture. Aged for 20 months in 80 percent French new oak, the Napa Valley-made wine melds notes of roasted coffee, dark chocolate, and black mountain fruit. Founded by real estate broker James Keller, KHK is an ode to his friends, the late Bill Hall behind the Halls Chophouse brand, and restaurateur Thomas Keller of The French Laundry fame.

\$ SRP: \$55 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 khkwines.com

3. SAZERAC

Bartenders asked for a higher-proof rye Sazerac whiskey to use in their cocktails, and Buffalo Trace Distillery delivered with a 100-proof iteration. Better suited to drinks, especially classics like the Manhattan, it's rich and versatile, maintaining its signature profile of candied spice and citrus yet adding more welcome depth.

\$ SRP: \$29.99 per one-liter bottle

🔗 buffalotracdistillery.com

4. BROOKLYN KURA

Brooklyn Kura, New York's first sake brewery, has rolled out Kura, its inaugural shochu. Made in small batches and gently pot-distilled from rice leftover during sake production, this kasutori shochu undergoes a secondary fermentation using white koji. Tasting of toasted rice, custard, and jasmine, it also helps elevate cocktail creations.

\$ SRP: \$54 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 brooklynkura.com

5. INVIVO X, SJP

Once again, Sarah Jessica Parker teamed up with New Zealand winery Invivo and a family estate from Lambesc, South Provence, to hatch the Invivo X, SJP Rosé 2024, the fourth vintage of this popular wine using grapes from Roy René vineyard. Exhibiting strawberry, rose petal, and fresh herbs on the palate, it can be sipped as an aperitif, or alongside dishes like goat cheese salad and lamb.

\$ SRP: \$19.99 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 invivoxsjp.com

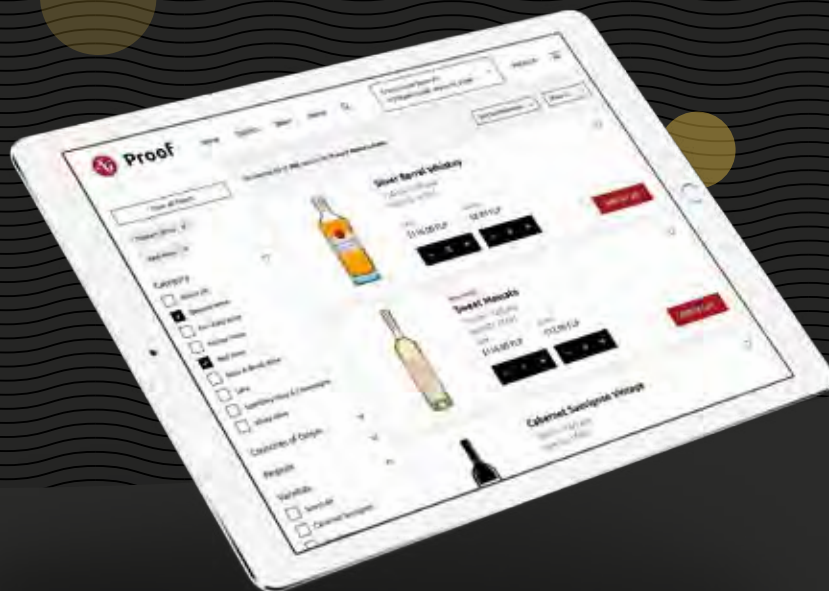
6. CORTADA TEQUILA

A hint of smoke defines Cortada, blanco and reposado tequilas brought to life by fourth-generation master distiller Graciela "Grace" Gonzalez. Based on a recipe from Gonzalez's great-grandfather, the spirit showcases hand-selected 100 percent blue Weber agave from Jalisco's Los Altos that is cooked and smoked over mesquite and Mexican oak woods. Both expressions work well in breezy cocktails like a Margarita or Ranch Water.

\$ SRP: \$49.99 to \$54.99 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 cortadatequila.com

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7. KNOB CREEK

Last year's introduction of Knob Creek Bourbon x Rye Kentucky blended straight whiskey was so clamored for, it's back for a second round. Uniting Knob Creek's nine-year-old bourbon and seven-year-old rye, the 113-proof spirit balances caramel and toffee notes with a touch of fruitiness, black pepper, and lingering spice.

\$ SRP: \$44.99 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 knobcreek.com

8. DURIGUTTI

Argentina's under-the-radar Criolla Chica grape is the star of Proyecto Las Compuertas 2024, from Durigutti Family Winemakers. Sourced from organically farmed vineyards in the Las Compuertas region, the red wine is naturally fermented and matured in unlined concrete eggs. Its floral and strawberry aromas culminate in a citrusy finish.

\$ SRP: \$20 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 durigutti.com

9. CHAMPAGNE NICOLAS FEUILLATTE

Crafted from largely Pinot Noir and Meunier and rounded out with Chardonnay, the vibrant Champagne Nicolas Feuillatte Réserve Exclusive Rosé NV is rife with flavors of red currant, blueberry, and raspberry, underpinned by wild strawberry.

\$ SRP: \$69.99 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 nicolas-feuillatte.com

10. WESTLAND DISTILLERY

For the 92-proof second batches in its limited-release Cask Exploration Series of beer cask- and wine cask-finished American single malts, Seattle's Westland Distillery collaborated with regional brewers and winemakers to illuminate another side of Pacific Northwest terroir. While the malty Beer Cask Finish incorporates scotch ale, stout, doppelbock, and saison casks, the Wine Cask Finish embraces barrels of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Washington red blend for fruity layers interspersed with dark chocolate and toasted almond.

\$ SRP: \$74.99 per 700-ml bottle

🔗 westlanddistillery.com

11. PÔTIERI COCKTAIL

While visiting a secluded island off the coast of Cartagena in Colombia, Vladimir Laurent savored a passion fruit libation he couldn't get out of his head. So, he set out to recreate it back in the U.S. and the result is Pôtieri Cocktail, a ready-to-drink concoction (21% ABV) marrying vodka, craft brandy, and real passion fruit juice. Sweet and tangy, it can be enjoyed on its own or mixed with the likes of sparkling water, herbs, and fresh fruit.

\$ SRP: \$34 per 750-ml bottle

🔗 potiercocktails.com

12. OWL'S BREW

Ideal for summer's last surge of warm days is Owl's Brew Sun Tea Variety Pack. The ready-to-drink cocktails (5% ABV), available in Strawberry Basil, Blueberry Lemon, and Half Tea & Half Lemonade variants, are made with real vodka and brewed red rooibos, green rooibos, or black teas. Free of sugar and bubbles, each can is just 110 calories.

\$ SRP: \$21.99 per six-pack of 12-oz. cans

🔗 theowlsbrew.com



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THE LOCAL MOTIVE

COLLEEN AND TYLER WITTIG ARE 'SYKED'

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | PICTURES BY ASHLI MIX PHOTOGRAPHY

Husband-and-wife entrepreneurial team Colleen and Tyler Wittig were on staff together at the Market Tavern in Sykesville for seven years before they decided to make their pitch and take over the business from the previous owners. They re-opened in January 2023 as **The Local Motive** with help from younger brother-in-law Mike Wittig, and it's been all aboard and full steam ahead ever since.

"We are a cocktail bar in Sykesville," Colleen declared, in a recent phone interview with the Beverage Journal. "It's a cute, little town and there is not too much around like us, except for a staple restaurant and pub, E W Beck's that has been around for 30 years. We just thought our charming Main Street needed a little more! There is a distillery and a small wine shop. But having a cocktail bar that serves light fare like sandwiches and salads just adds to the whole vibe of the street, I think."

Sykesville has been trying to prove its "vibe" ever since Colleen was a kid. She grew up in Eldersburg, which is just a few minutes from Sykesville. "We never went down to Main Street growing up!" she said. "There just wasn't much there. But now that it is becoming a more hap-

pening place, more visitors are coming in. So, we are getting some new people and new faces in addition to the regulars that we have.”

But it is her regulars, her core customers, who are the lifeblood of The Local Motive. Wittig states, “We have a lot of people who come in every day, and we know their name and know their drink. Everybody knows everybody, which is kind of cool. But Sykesville has indeed been blowing up for the past five or 10 years or so. I think it was 2016 that Sykesville won Coolest Small Town in America [by Budget Travel Magazine]. Since then, it’s really come along.”

With this being the latest in our ongoing series of feature articles spotlighting bars, restaurants, pubs, and taverns in and around Maryland featuring fun, funny, or quirky names, we asked for the story behind The Local Motive name. Wittig replied, “Sykesville is a train town. There is a railroad running right near us. The train can be super load when it goes by. We wanted to do something with the train, and we also wanted to play off that we have a lot of local patrons. It was my husband who thought of the name. The locals are our motive and having the bar’s name sound like ‘locomotive’ definitely goes with train theme.”

In terms of The Local Motive’s beverage menu, the drink offerings lean heavily on such popular classics as the Old Fashioned and mar-



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Tyler & Colleen Wittig (with daughter, Lucy) owners

The Local Motive

Witting was quick to answer: “I love the smiles. I love seeing the regulars who come in and continue to enjoy our space. It was also fun designing the interior. When you come in, you see a cool and quirky atmosphere. We’re a little different than the typical pub. The Local Motive is very cozy.”

Any downsides? “I think people think that owning a bar is a lot of fun. And, don’t get me wrong. It is! There are a lot of fun parts about it. But there is a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff that is less fun – the scheduling, the payroll, the taxes. When I would rather be sitting with the people, instead I have to be sitting in the office cranking away.”

She continued, “I went into this knowing that I had to be present for my staff and the bar and the business. Have fun, yes. But do all of the other things, as well. To run a good business, you have to be there and do all of the not-so-fun stuff, too. Also, in this business, things always take longer than you think they’re going to. But that’s OK. Don’t be afraid of change. Sometimes you make a decision, and it ends up not working. It is OK to switch it up and change it.”

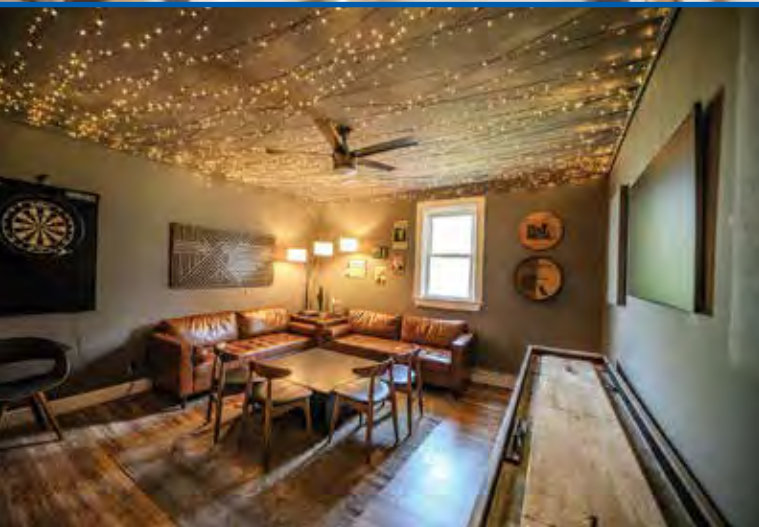
In the end, it is the Wittigs’ optimism that has perhaps served them best as still fairly new business owners. Wittig said, “You have to be a realist to a certain extent. But it’s a lot easier to get through the days if you have positivity in mind. Obviously, there are going to be good days and slow days. It’s more fun to look forward to the good ones.”

But the biggest challenge for Colleen is a relatively new one. But a blessed and wonderful one. When asked what that biggest test currently is, she adjusted the phone on her end and answered, “Well, I am holding my six-week-old daughter, Lucy, right now as I talk to you!” ■

garitas. Additionally, there is a variety of craft beers and fine wines. “We also have some fun drinks,” Wittig noted. “We infuse marshmallow into vodka, and that’s really popular. It’s just lime, simple syrup, and marshmallow vodka, but it’s super refreshing and delicious. And we serve it with a marshmallow on top.”

So, what’s the favorite part of co-owning a small town cocktail bar?





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WHISKEY: WHAT'S NEW

TWO YEARS OLDER

In 2022, **Castle & Key** launched a four-year-old bourbon, the first to be distilled at the historic Old Taylor estate in almost five decades. Now, there's a six-year-old. The 101-proof, small-batch bourbon, made from a mash bill of 73 percent white corn, 10 percent rye, and 17 percent malted barley, expresses molasses, orange zest, and cinnamon on the palate.

SRP: \$39.99 per 750-ml bottle



BACK IN THE DAY

Eager to raise catfish and bluegill, the late Booker Noe installed a pond in the backyard of his home. His son Fred, Beam Family's seventh-generation master distiller, had such powerful memories of the meditative spot that he named the second offering in the **Booker's Bourbon** 2025 collection the "By the Pond" Batch. Aged for just over seven years, the 126.5-proof whiskey is comprised of barrels from seven production dates that were matured in eight different warehouses.

SRP: \$99.99 per 750-ml bottle



EYE-OPENER

Coffee and whiskey unite in **Bib & Tucker's** 92-proof Gold Roast Bourbon. Layered with notes of vanilla and brown spice, the Tennessee bourbon is born from a mash bill of corn, rye, and barley, and filtered through sugar maple charcoal before maturing for a minimum of six years in new American oak barrels. For added complexity, Arabica beans from Tennessee's own small-batch Muletown Coffee Roasters are then steeped in the liquid via a cold extraction process prior to blending.

SRP: \$49.99 per 750-ml bottle

PLAYING BY THE RULES

This year's edition of **Old Grand-Dad** seven-year-old bonded bourbon puts the spotlight on spring 2018. That's the single distillation season when this annual release upholding the requirements of the Bottled-in-Bond Act was barreled. Notes of charred oak and vanilla lead to a velvety caramel finish in this 100-proof, rye-forward whiskey.

SRP: \$39.99 per 750-ml bottle



GOLDEN STATE HOMAGE

California teems with wine and craft beer producers, and San Francisco's Hotaling & Co. distillery continues to celebrate that bounty by introducing a duo of rye whiskeys to **Old Potrero's** California Cellar Series. While the floral 114.6-proof toasted barrel variety is finished in Gewürztraminer casks from Gundlach Bundschu winery in Sonoma for 14 months, the 115-proof roasted malt-laden straight rye is heightened by the five months it spent in barrels previously holding imperial stout from Almanac Beer Co. in Alameda.

SRP: \$79.99 per 700-ml bottle

CREATE EXCELLENCE, DAMN THE RULES

RED HOOK, BROOKLYN

When you assemble a bourbon by hand, using the richest and rarest straight bourbons, but do it in Brooklyn of all places, you're bound to draw some attention. We don't mind. That's why we overruled the rule book. Then tossed it. We decided to grow our own corn. Heirloom style. We revived the art of blending. We proof our bourbons using mineral water from the Rosendale Mines of New York. It might not be how it's normally done; it might even raise a few eyebrows. But sometimes if you want to create the extraordinary, you can't be afraid to disturb the peace.

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FINANCIAL FUNDAMENTALS FOR BEVERAGE DIRECTORS

**A BEVERAGE PROGRAM CAN BRING IN UP TO 50 PERCENT OF
A RESTAURANT OR BAR'S REVENUE —SO FOR BEVERAGE
DIRECTORS, FINANCIAL LITERACY IS NON-NEGOTIABLE**

BY KATE DINGWALL

There's an allure in being a beverage director. Autonomy, creativity—the freedom to bring your own drinks and perspective to a restaurant or bar's beverage program.

But when Carolina Gonzalez, now the beverage director of Chicago's Diego, Entre Sueños's pop-up series, and the forthcoming Trino, was first promoted to a beverage director role in 2017, she found an unexpected side of the job: spreadsheets. Lots and lots of Excel spreadsheets.

"It's part of the business people don't understand," says Gonzalez.

Gonzalez can make a great cocktail. But as a now-seasoned beverage director,

her role isn't just drink ideation and curation—it's to drive revenue for her restaurants and bars.

"We're creatives," Gonzalez says. "But if the numbers don't match up, the bar doesn't stay open."

"Restaurant margins are super thin," says Dustin Wilson, a Master Sommelier, co-founder of Verve Wine, and founding partner of Apres Cru Hospitality. "If wine starts running five points above budget, it could drown the restaurant."

Ready for a role as a beverage director? Experienced experts across the country unpack P&Ls, COGS, and all the other essential acronyms and metrics needed to build a booming beverage program.



Carolina Gonzalez, the beverage director of Diego, Entre Sueños's pop-ups, and the forthcoming Trino.

FINANCIALS METRICS TO UNDERSTAND

■ PROFIT AND LOSS STATEMENTS

Profit and loss (P&L) statements turn all the major metrics of a restaurant, from labor costs to profits, into line items. It's an income statement that documents all costs, expenses, and losses. For operators and upper management, this is your bible—it captures opportunities and pain points, including what parts of the business are successful and where money is being lost.

■ POUR COSTS

A large part of the job is building the list: picking bottles that appeal, but also ensuring that they sell at a profit.

“A solid foundation starts with understanding your pour costs—how much each cocktail or pour of spirit costs the business—and pricing accordingly,” says Catherine Manabat, the hospitality manager of Kentucky's New Riff Distilling.

Pour costs equal the raw cost of every ounce that reaches a customer. For example, if a 750-milliliter bottle of liquor costs a bar \$40, it translates to \$1.57 per ounce. Wine, on the other hand, is measured by bottle or by-the-glass cost. Programs like BackBar can calculate these costs quickly.

■ COST OF GOODS SOLD

Another key metric is the cost of goods sold, or COGS. This is calculated by adding the cost of raw materials (be it bottle cost, or pour cost and ingredient costs) to the starting inventory, minus the ending inventory.

“It's a crucial metric that allows the operator to assess what their cost is for every cocktail or glass of wine sold,” says Daniel Shereff, the director of beverage and service operations at Excelsior Hospitality Group in Austin.

Operators will flip that into a percentage of total sales, which acts as both a beacon and a barometer of success.

Tawnya Zwicker, who runs Blue Door, a wine bar-bottle shop in Toronto, looks to hit 40 percent to 50 percent, which accounts for all the costs of running a business. “We



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Dustin Wilson, MS, Verve Wine and Apres Cru Hospitality; Daniel Shereff, Excelsior Hospitality Group.

aren't a not-for-profit [organization],” she points out. “There has to be money there to pay for suppliers, repairs, insurance, you name it.” Industry standard for COGS usually falls between 30 and 50 percent.

There's wiggle room. She's willing to take a hit on profit if it benefits the bar long-term. “You have to ask—are there ways we can encourage multi-bottle sales? These orders get a small discount but that's okay, because we know these are guaranteed or repeat sales.”

■ GROSS MARGINS AND REVENUE

Revenue is the total income your business brings in, before considering expenses and cost of goods. Profits are the dollars taken home after labor and expenses are considered. Gross margin equals sales subtracted by COGS, not taking into account all the other costs of doing business.

Gross margin is one of Wilson's most important metrics for tracking cost management and profitability. “It's the numbers that you're bringing into the business,” he says. “It's less paid attention to, but it's valuable to understand. Even if your COGS go up, which could be viewed as negative, if your gross margin dollars are going up over time, those numbers will give a business more dollars to work with.”

Building long-term revenue isn't just about pricing drinks to cover overhead. It's a balancing act—offering accessible pours and fast-moving drinks that subsidize more exciting, creative options.

“You have to figure out the biggest drivers of margins, which will allow you to play with prices and offer deals,” says Wilson.

Wines by the glass, for example, can be priced higher and move the most volume. “That's where restaurants tend to make a good chunk of their money,” says Wilson.

Higher-margin categories allow him to take a haircut on higher-end wines—great Burgundy, Bordeaux, Barolo, or Montalcino. “Folks who like those wines are used to drinking them—they know the prices,” says Wilson. “You want them to look at that list and say, ‘wow.’ They'll come back, and they're going to be high-value guests.”

Similarly, Taylor Johnson, the beverage director of Echelon Kitchen & Bar in Ann Arbor, Michigan, aims for a 20 to 25 percent cost of goods for her more affordable spirits. Meanwhile, high-end spirits, reserve selections, large-format beers, and specialty pours are closer to 40 to 50 percent COGS—beverages that bring a special edge to the program.

“You need balance,” says Gonzalez. “I have cocktails that are lower-cost and crushable. My higher-tier cocktails are pricier as far as costs go but they offer experiences. Things people won't see elsewhere.”

THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

While financial fundamentals are essential, they are tools, and beverage directors need to understand how to implement them.

“True and lasting success goes beyond spreadsheets and formulas,” says Manabat. “It requires you to consider the broader experience you're creating—not just for your guests, but for your team as well.”

■ UNDERSTANDING INVENTORY AND LABOR

It costs money to hire staff, train them, buy glassware, break glassware, repair dishwashers, and keep things like jiggers, shakers, and towels in stock.

“Running accurate and timely inventory counts, balancing purchases with clear intent on menu needs versus projected business needs, along with timely communication with ownership are crucial in curating a successful program,” says Johnson.

Her advice is to understand the budget—keep a close eye on everything coming in and out of the beverage program. Be aware of the costs of anything else that affects profit—how many glasses are getting broken? Are ingredients going to waste after a service?

“A beautifully profitable cocktail menu doesn’t help much if your labor to execute it eats up the margin,” says Krystin Reuber, the beverage director at PostBoy! in New Buffalo, Michigan.

If labor is under your jurisdiction, don’t overstaff the bar, train your team well, and massage the schedule as needed. “Labor is best controlled by writing a schedule properly with the necessary metrics in mind,” says Johnson. “It’s more difficult to ask someone to go home than to schedule light if you anticipate a slower service. Utilize salaried managers to their max, create SOPs [standard operating procedures], and provide the tools necessary to have hourly team members hold themselves and their teammates accountable.”

Taylor Johnson, Echelon Kitchen & Bar.



■ LEVERAGE DISTRIBUTOR RELATIONSHIPS

Purchasing alcohol from distributors comes with its own set of financial fundamentals. There may be minimum case purchases, deals on multi-case buys, and one-off discounts (depending on state regulations). Some states require buyers to pay cash on delivery, while others allow for payment terms of 30 to 90 days.

But it’s also important to maintain strong relationships with distributor contacts and leverage them strategically. “It’s a smart way to stretch your dollar,” says Reuber. “Work with them for case deals and incentives, but don’t let discounts push you to over-order.”

Some suppliers will allow buyers to mix and match cases with several SKUs in their portfolio. Others will offer smaller minimum case deals so restaurants can bring on less—ideal if you’re a cocktail bar with a small square footage. Space, along with budget, is a major consideration—while reps can offer small discounts on larger case purchases, where are you going to put it? And do you have the cash flow to accommodate that larger buy? Case deals may only make sense for well spirits or by-the-glass wines.

This year was the first time Johnson negotiated a large purchase in the time of tariffs, working with a distributor to land a big order of exclusive-to-them bottles. “By paying upfront, we avoided price spikes and secured our quantities. The distributor agreed to store the back stock and ship our wines case by case, so we didn’t have to find space for a full pallet.”

Johnson also exclusively uses electronic funds transfer, or EFT, payments, so every order is tracked and paid promptly. “Processing electronic invoices has been a game changer, ensuring pricing accuracy and allowing us to review any historic invoices when needed.”



Krystin Reuber, PostBoy!

■ CALCULATING WASTE AND SPILLAGE

Waste can build up, from small pours given to regulars or spoiled bottles at the end of a shift. “It’s a hidden drain,” says Reuber. “So track your inventory closely, standardize recipes, and train staff well to reduce overpouring and spoilage.”

If you are comping drinks, track the offerings in a comp tab so you know how much is going out. Gonzalez also considers how quickly bottles, even on the back bar, move. “With inventory, if you have bottles that aren’t selling, or your staff aren’t properly trained to sell them, it’s just cash sitting there.”

■ BALANCING THE BOOKS

The biggest advice that seasoned beverage directors can offer is not to be passive. Monitor revenue, gross margins, profits, and cost of goods, and pivot when numbers start to slump.

“Any reputable restaurant has a budget, which says your targeted cost of goods sold is 30 percent, as an example,” says Wilson, who notes that it’s the beverage director’s job to meet that budget. “If your boss comes to you and says, ‘We need to restructure the budget and you need to get the cost of goods down to 25 percent,’ you need to understand how to do that.”

While absorbing the financial aspect of running a beverage program might seem daunting at first, eventually it becomes second nature. “At the end of the day, the goal is simple: know your numbers, know your market, and build a menu that makes people want to come back,” says Reuber. ■



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HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR BLIND TASTING SKILLS

FROM DRY TASTING TO HONING IN ON A WINE'S STRUCTURE, THESE ARE THE METHODS THAT HAVE HELPED INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS BECOME EXPERT BLIND TASTERS

BY CAITLIN A. MILLER



W

hile it's easy to romanticize blind wine tasting, it isn't an art form or a party trick, and it's definitely not a guessing game. "I used to be a super feelings- and emotion-driven taster, but after two failed attempts at the Master Sommelier exam, I shifted to a more data-driven approach," says Jonathan Eichholz, MS, an educator at GuildSomm.

"It's not very creative what we have people do in a tasting exam," confirms Tim Gaiser, MS, the author of *Message in the Bottle: A Guide to Tasting Wine* and an instructor at the Napa Valley Wine

Academy (NVWA). "But what it is is a skill in which we're requiring people to use a framework and neurologically do the same things over again and assess what's different and how they're representing that internally."

Learning how to do that successfully can be a physically and mentally demanding pursuit that's both incredibly rewarding and extremely humbling. The reasons for attempting to master this skill are myriad, but whatever the end goal, the journey is a long one.

"It's just one of those things that you cannot rush," says Peter Marks, MW, the vice president of the NVWA and the current panel chair of The Institute of Masters of Wine tasting exam. He points to

LEFT: Claudia Chamberlain (right) blind tastes a wine in preparation for both the MW and MS exams.



Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, which argues that you need 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert at a complex skill. Looking back, Marks calculated that he did indeed spend 10,000 hours studying for the MW exam before he passed.

At every stage in such a long journey, it's worth taking stock of your progress to assess what's working and what needs improvement. The best advice for improving blind tasting skills often comes from the community of like-minded wine professionals that have gone through this unique endeavour. "In wine, everything is better achieved through community," says Claudia Chamberlain, a regional sales manager for Jackson Family Wines and an instructor at Capital Wine School, who is currently studying for both the MW and MS exams. "It takes a village to be able to get across the line to that master-level tasting."

In that spirit, expert tasters from across the industry share their best advice for becoming a better blind taster.

STOP BLIND TASTING

"One doesn't train for a marathon by running lots of marathons," says Eichholz. At its core, blind tasting is a practical application of theory, so you need to continuously build your knowledge base.

Before you approach a wine, "You have to have at your fingertips the knowledge about grapes and regions and quality levels and styles and acidity levels so that you can look at your notes and go, 'If we

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have ABCD ... it's most likely going to fit this," says Christopher Martin, MW, the director of education at the Wine Scholar Guild. "It's so much reading," confirms Chamberlain. "It's knowing the behind-the-scenes, making sure you have the keys to the kingdom before you even hit the flight."

START DRY 'TASTING'

To connect the dots between the theory and what's in the glass, Marks recommends another step before blind tasting, particularly for students working toward the MW exam: practice writing good tasting notes. "That can often be done [by writing] dry tasting notes, so you don't have to go out and buy all the wines," he says. "You should know what a Pinot Noir from Carneros tastes like versus one from Vosne-Romanée and be able to differentiate those."

Along with dry tasting, Marks says that "doing open [non-blind] tasting is often a really good thing so you can find

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Jonathan Eichholz, MS; Amber Rill, a stage-two Master of Wine candidate.

your clues." Amber Rill, previously the assistant food and beverage manager at the recently closed Corkbuzz Union Square and a current MW student, does just that. "We do a lot of open-label tasting, where we're assessing [the wines] and seeing if we can pinpoint how we would reference these in an exam or in a blind tasting setting," she says.

RECALIBRATE

There's no getting around the fact that you need to be a good taster. "Meaning, can you taste acid levels, sugar levels, alcohol levels, tannin levels, and be able to match those tasting skills with what the actual wine in the glass is presenting," says Marks. "If you're not calibrating correctly, you can make assumptions that are wrong because you're just not getting the evidence."

To calibrate or recalibrate your palate, it's useful to go back to basics. "I took a sensory analysis class at UC Davis where they took wines that were not just [showing] acid, tannin, sugar, and those things, but also faults," says Marks. "At home, you can take measured amounts of sugar, tartaric acid, you can buy powder tannin, and do those [calibration tastings] at home."

FOCUS ON STRUCTURE

Martin points to the book *Beyond Flavour: Wine Tasting by Structure* by Nick Jackson, MW, which argues that a wine's structure

is a more reliable indicator of its identity than flavor.

“There is an overreliance on and slight obsession with aromas ... but I would say that for the vast majority of wines, aroma is not the main thing that takes me to a [conclusion]. Texture is the way to get there.” Eichholz agrees: “Structure will set you free. You can’t make high-acid Vigonier or low-tannin Cabernet Sauvignon.”

PERSONALIZE YOUR APPROACH

Everyone has unique strengths and weaknesses, and identifying your personal skills will help focus your studies. “You need to know not just how to taste, but how you taste personally,” confirms Martin.

“I struggle with Chablis,” says Rill. “It’s a wine I really like to drink, but for some reason when you get it in front of me in a glass blind, I really struggle. The thing that helped me a lot is learning laterals. If I think something could potentially be Chablis, what would be the other possible grapes it could be or regions in the world that it could come from?”

TAKE CUES FROM OTHERS

One of the best ways that Chamberlain has found for improving her tasting skills is listening to other people taste. “When you hear other people give a tasting note and then you find out what the wine is, it’s almost like something clicks in your brain,” she says. Even if you don’t have a local tasting group, Chamberlain suggests listening to people blind taste on YouTube or on the GuildSomm podcast.



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– Christopher Martin, MW

Tasting groups, however, are crucial. “Any kind of intentional group that you can put together around wine is the first place to start,” says Chamberlain, who says she welcomes out-of-town guests to their Washington, D.C.-based tasting groups, so those people take what they learn back to their local communities. At Chamberlain’s tasting group, “We meet two to three days a week and we do six-wine blinds,” she explains. “I’ll usually have [tasting] grids printed out for people and we practice verbal tasting.”

STUDY ACROSS THE AISLE

Verbal tasting might sound unnecessary, not to mention intimidating, to anyone outside of the Court of Master Sommeliers (CMS) program, but Chamberlain feels strongly that mixing up your style of blind tasting has huge benefits.

“I always encourage WSET [Wine & Spirit Education Trust] students ... if you have access to one of those verbal tasting groups, go,” she says. “Feel free to just grid it out loud in WSET format, but I find that it helps everybody. That kind

LEFT: Peter Marks, MW.



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Christopher Martin, MW; Tim Gaiser, MS.

of cross function—between WSET, which is more of a classroom setting, definitely more foundational, versus CMS, which is more like choose your own adventure—really does help build out a tasting lexicon pretty quickly.”

EVOLVE WITH THE TIMES

“The world of wine is changing rapidly,” says Eichholz. “So our approach to tasting needs to change. Old tasting lessons, conventions, and paradigms are no longer relevant. The world of wine is also more wonderfully diverse than ever, and we should be continuously expanding our tasting vocabulary to welcome other flavors, aromas, and cultures.”

These major changes are influencing exams, too. “There’s a hell of a lot more wines that are available,” says Marks. “How do you taste them all? In that regard, the Master of Wine exam has evolved significantly over the years. It has become less of a pure identification exam. We are putting more emphasis on other aspects, like quality, commercial potential, maturity, and style.”

GET COMFORTABLE BEING WRONG

One thing everyone emphasizes? “Don’t be afraid of being completely wrong,” says Martin. “In blind tasting you really have to put your ego aside. Some days you’re tasting really well and some days you’re not. And you just sort of go, okay, I’ll just enjoy the wine, or if not, maybe just have a beer.” ■