



2023 Wine & Spirits Tasting Competition Judges



Wine Tasting Competition Judges



Leyla Arcovio

Director of Wine Operations & Special Events
Reid's Fine Foods, Charlotte, NC

Born in Lima, Peru to a Spanish father and an Italian mother, into a family whose togetherness centered around wine and food, she started a career in the wine and hospitality industry twenty years ago in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Co-Owner of Salute Italian Ristorante and Co-Founder of the "Slow Food" Movement in Charlotte, NC, she directed an all-Italian Bar/Restaurant wine menu and wine retail stores. Featured in multiple local, USA Today, and international magazines as one of the top ten restaurants in the country to watch for, and Leyla as a rising star in the business.

Awarded twice by Wine Spectator with the "Award of Excellence," she created "Leyla's Winning Wines" in 2008 as a travel wine show.

Joined Reid's Fine Foods in 2010 managing an extensive wine program for five restaurants and retail wine stores highlighting a broad selection of wine brands properly selected for each location's demographics.

Created private wine labels under Reid's and Leyla brand in partnership with European and domestic vineyards.



Patrick Brady

Owner
Brady's Wine Warehouse, New Orleans, LA

Patrick Brady graduated from Tulane University with a bachelor's degree in finance and an MBA with a concentration in business strategy. He's worked in finance in New York City, and although he still calls that field an interest, his passions drew him to the wine industry and entrepreneurship. In 2015 he opened Brady's Wine Warehouse in New Orleans and will be the first to credit the store's success to the amazing team with which he surrounds himself.



Wine Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Jodi Bronchtein

Wine Director

Audrey Nashville and June Nashville

Jodi Bronchtein joins the Audrey/June team as Wine Director, bringing a wealth of experience from her time in the world of wine and decades in the hospitality industry.

Born in Los Angeles and raised in Brooklyn and Fredericksburg, Virginia, Bronchtein received a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia in Humanities and Social Sciences. Upon graduating from college, Bronchtein brought her strong sense of compassion and knowledge of human behavior to a variety of roles, including careers in teaching children on the Autism Spectrum and working as a Counselor for marginalized youth.

Jodi began her wine career in 2011 at Sean's Brock's McCrady's in Charleston, SC. After witnessing the level of attention placed on every dish, Bronchtein realized she needed to better understand how wine and food interacted. During a blind wine tasting with the McCrady's team at line-up, she started studying, obtaining her Certified Sommelier certification through the Court of Master Sommeliers.

After five years at McCrady's, Jodi walked the Camino Frances from France to Muxia, Spain. The Camino de Santiago encouraged her to travel and Bronchtein worked as a Sommelier at L'Espalier in Boston, Kokomo Private Island in Fiji, and Press Restaurant in Napa Valley. She partnered with Benchmark Wines leading wine tastings and interviewing producers and formed her own private business Ultreia Wine Outfitters before driving to Nashville to rejoin Sean Brock and team at Audrey in 2021.

Bronchtein's extensive wine mastery and hospitality background, coupled with her innate ability to comprehend and translate a guest's wants and needs, brings a tremendous advantage to the Audrey team. To Bronchtein, leadership is best taught through example and her impact can be seen throughout the restaurant's operations, including menu planning, wine pairing, event coordination, and weekly hour-long staff wine education. Her favorite place to be is pouring wine during service watching guests thoroughly enjoy their experience.

Jodi became an Advanced Sommelier in 2019 and is currently studying for Master's Theory. In 2021 she obtained her Wine and Spirits Education Trust Level 3 and is planning on obtaining the WSET Diploma. When she's not working, you can find Jodi buying plane tickets, traveling, voraciously reading, cooking, singing, dancing, and studying.



Caitlin Burdick

Global Specialty Wine Category Merchant

Whole Foods, Austin, TX

Caitlin has worked in the wine industry since 2014. She began as an Assistant Winemaker in Texas; but have been in the retail space for the last six years. Caitlin is currently a Senior Category Merchant for wine at Whole Foods Market Global Headquarters. She has her WSET III certification and is working on sake certifications as well.



Wine Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Carlos Cisneros

Wine Director & Sommelier
Bocca Ristorante & Bistro 218, Birmingham, AL

Wine & Spirits Education Trust. Having worked 32 years in the restaurant business, he has worked at some of the finest restaurants where he resides in Birmingham, AL. Carlos is the wine director and sommelier for Bocca Ristorante and Bistro 218.



Bill Edwards

Wine Buyer
Carmine's Gourmet Market, Palm Beach Gardens, FL

Bill Edwards is the Wine Buyer for Carmine's Gourmet Market in Palm Beach Gardens. Bill graduated from Delhi University with an A.A.S in Ornamental Horticulture. A horticulturist at the Central Park Conservancy, Bill moved on to **built** a career in magazine publishing before co-founding 319 Wine Cheese Shoppe/ Bistro in Tallahassee, where he was the Wine Educator and General Manager. The Bistro's accolades included Best Wine List and Best Locally Owned Restaurant from the local paper.

In 2019, Bill moved to South Florida as Wine, Beer, Spirits Manager and Buyer for Lucky's Market. He is WSET Level 2 certified with Distinguish Honors, and holds certificates as an Italian Wine Specialist, and Argentinian Wine Specialist. He's currently working on his Napa Valley Wine Expert and Oregon Wine Specialist Certificates. Bill is a panel judge for the American Fine Wine Competition.



Gary Fisch

Founder & CEO
Gary's Wine and Marketplace, Wayne, NJ

When Gary was working toward his B.S. from Rider College in political science, he didn't yet know where life would take him. Gary fell in love with wine in his senior year of college while working with his father, a liquor salesman, when he traveled to Louis Martini for a business trip. During the visit, Louis spent hours communicating his passion for the winemaking process to Gary. After that experience, Gary knew he wanted to become an expert, so he enrolled in the Sommelier Institute in New Jersey and several of Windows on the World's wine courses. That enthusiasm and knowledge served him well when he teamed up with his brother Mark in 1987 and opened his first store in Madison, New Jersey.

After years of expansion, Gary's now has several locations in New Jersey, as well as a flagship location in St. Helena, CA, right across the street from Louis Martini, where it all began for Gary. Gary and his wife, Liz, spend part of the year living in their house in St. Helena, so on any given day, you may run into Gary helping guests find the perfect wine. Gary's passion for customer service, wine, and retail is palpable, and can be felt walking through every one of his stores.





Wine Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Michael Franz

Wine List Consultant
Clyde's Restaurant Group, Washington, DC

Michael Franz, Ph.D., is a wine writer, editor, educator, restaurant consultant, and competition judge. He is Lead Wine Reviewer for The Tasting Panel Magazine, editor of Wine Review Online, wine consultant for 12 restaurants in the Washington, D.C. area, and instructor for Capital Wine School. Franz has written for many national and international wine magazines and worked for 11 years as Wine Columnist for The Washington Post. He has judged wine competitions on six continents, is currently Chief Judge for two competitions based in California, and has conducted more than 1,600 site visits across all of the world's significant wine producing countries.



Mark Gluckman

Restaurant Wine Consultant
Scottsdale, AZ

Restaurant Wine Consultant and steward, conducting seminars at various private and corporate venues.

Have created wine lists for restaurants, I managed over 100 ICs (Independent Contractors) in four states: scheduling, product development, setting up wine tastings and seminars.

WSET 2 - studied with Gary Spadafore at Breakthru Beverage Cru Artisan College, U of Banfi - Italian wine course

Attended numerous seminars including: Burgundy (12 - live French video feed), Bordeaux, Penfolds with DLynn Proctor, Chilean (Banfi) wines with Sharon McCarthy (Phoenix), Banfi Italian wines with Lars Leicht (Napa) and Bill Whiting (Phoenix). Visited over 120 wineries in Napa, Sonoma, Paso Robles, Finger Lakes (NY), Italy, France, Germany and Spain.

In 2019 spent three weeks in Germany working two weeks at a winery in Laufen and toured the Mosel Valley wineries for a week. Spent the entire month of October 2021 in Spain/France visiting 14 wineries.



Wendy Heilmann

Director of Wine & Spirits
Pebble Beach Resorts, Pebble Beach, CA

Wendy was born and raised in rural Wisconsin. Upon receiving her undergraduate degree in Communication Arts at UW-Madison, she headed west to pursue her Master's Degree at USC's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism. After graduation, she began a career in technology project management. In 1994 a promotion took her to Northern California, where the intoxicating elixir of wine wafting down from Napa lured her from spreadsheets to Sauvignon and triggered a career change.

Wendy has been at Pebble Beach Resorts since 2005, and is responsible for Beverage operations for all outlets which account for over \$26 million in revenue. Her proudest accomplishment to date was conceiving, designing and opening a wine bar and bottle shop – Stave Wine Cellar - at the Inn at Spanish Bay in 2015. In her spare time Wendy focuses on fitness with Peloton, rides and long hikes, and loves to travel to see live music whenever she can.



Wine Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Daniel Herrera

Manager/Buyer

Woodland Hills Wine Company, Woodland Hills, CA

I have been with Woodland Hills Wine Company for over 13+ years and currently the Sales Manager/Buyer. I had the opportunity to travel the world and visit wineries across Europe, attend master classes, and meet with renowned winemakers. Outside of work, I conduct private classes and Interview Winemakers on Instagram at "El Peruano Talk" and time to time help Somm at some restaurants as well. I have earned a Level 2 WSET certificate and am currently pursuing a Level 3 WSET.

Although born and raised in Peru, I grew up in what could be described as a traditional Italian household as his grandparents, who lived with the family, had originally migrated to Peru from Italy. I am just a guy looking for wine to fill his empty glass and chat.



Lonny Isenberg

Wine Merchant

Haskell's Wine and Spirits, Minneapolis, MN

Lonny developed his passion for wine in the mid 1990's while working for a tech company based in Silicon Valley and was able to spend many weekends traveling through Napa and Sonoma Valley's wine country. In 2004 he turned his passion into a job and started working for Haskell's Wine and Spirits in Minneapolis as a wine merchant and has spent the last 19 years expanding his wine knowledge and educating customers.



Alice Itsell

Adult Beverage Manager

AJ's Fine Foods, Phoenix, AZ

Retail has been the major focus of my career. I began in clothing retail in 1987, working for the Kmart Corporation as a soft line Fashions Manager. I then shifted my career to grocery retail to learn and grow my opportunities. In 1993 I started with Bashas' Family of Stores, this was a good entry into the food industry business where I learned products, merchandising, and standards. As the company grew, I gained experience through opening new stores, schematics, product placement, and education. My focus has been the AJ's Fine Foods

format since 2008 as the Specialist for the Wine Cellars. I continue to work with the Wine Cellar teams to grow the gourmet food format, develop the AJ's brand as well as expand our education on the ever-changing beer, wine, and spirit categories.

In 1987, I graduated from the University of Arizona with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration. I attended and graduated from the Food Industry Management Program at USC's Marshall School of Business 2001. While working at Bashas' I extended my education by completing the MBA course through the University of Phoenix. Each education opportunity has given me tools to adapt and grow with the industry. I continue to develop opportunities for education and improve my industry knowledge. Participation in the Society of Wine Educators program, WSET program, and regional seminars has kept me informed about trends and changes to the industry.



Wine Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Craig Ledbetter

Adult Beverage Manager
Fred Meyer Stores, Portland, OR

Ironically, I grew up in a “dry” small town in Alabama. I recall my father talking about my grandfather’s Moonshine still in the backwoods on his property, so of course alcohol adventures have intrigued me for years. I attended college in Atlanta where I started experimenting with alcohol. Several years I moved back to Alabama to help my sister renovate a historic home. The only thing that kept us sane through paint scraping and cutting more tile than anyone should endure was attendance in regular wine classes. Learning about grapes and regions as we sipped through cases of wine at home inspired us both to pursue a career in wine sales. In 2000, my passion for wine manifested itself into a job offer, and I relocated to the Pacific Northwest. I have loved this industry over the last 23 years working for a top volume grocery retailer. It’s brought me closer to the people, vineyards, business and art that create such a diverse industry.

If I could spend my time doing one thing for the business of wine: I would focus in on my passion for small producers, their stories and help promote their wines exclusively.



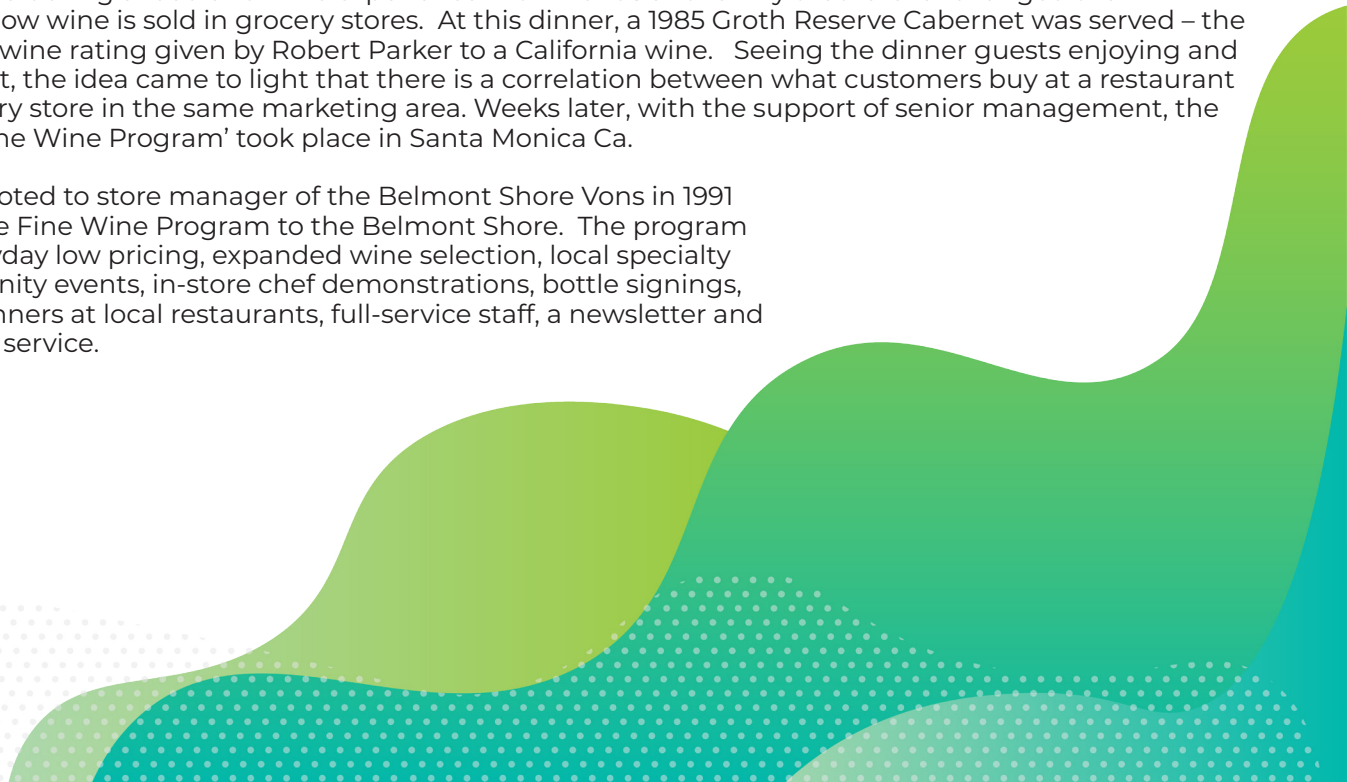
Phil Markert

Director of Liquor for Albertsons
Vons and Pavilions, Fullerton, CA

Phil Markert began his career in the retail grocery industry 44 years ago, where he worked as a stock clerk in an independent liquor store while attending high school in North Torrance. His career with the Safeway organization began in 1982, where Phil worked as a bagger in a Torrance store. He quickly advanced through the retail ranks, serving as clerk, head clerk, grocery manager, assistant manager and store manager.

His entrance into the liquor business began in early 1988 when he was introduced to Fine Wine at a restaurant in Santa Monica during a food and wine experience with friends and family that forever changed the landscape of how wine is sold in grocery stores. At this dinner, a 1985 Groth Reserve Cabernet was served – the first 100-point wine rating given by Robert Parker to a California wine. Seeing the dinner guests enjoying and talking about it, the idea came to light that there is a correlation between what customers buy at a restaurant and at a grocery store in the same marketing area. Weeks later, with the support of senior management, the birth of the ‘Fine Wine Program’ took place in Santa Monica Ca.

Phil was promoted to store manager of the Belmont Shore Vons in 1991 and moved the Fine Wine Program to the Belmont Shore. The program included everyday low pricing, expanded wine selection, local specialty foods, community events, in-store chef demonstrations, bottle signings, winemaker dinners at local restaurants, full-service staff, a newsletter and home delivery service.





Wine Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Mark Christopher Rink

Wine Director
The Fat Ox, Scottsdale, AZ

A lifelong resident of New York, until moving to Arizona 12 years ago. I had Italian heritage and was fortunate to enjoy and learn about this wonderful food from my maternal grandparents. My interest in wine started in the early eighties, when my family opened a restaurant. I realized the key components to a great restaurant were food, wine list, service and ambiance and how it could take a restaurant to the next level. I have continued to follow these principles.

At that time, great reference point wines from around the world were available and of great value. Being able to taste many of the great Bordeaux and Burgundy from the 20th century, enabled me to develop an extensive background in older wine. I've had the opportunity to work in many great restaurants, Tavern on the Green, Gotham Bar & Grill, Crabtree's Kittle House and now the Fat Ox in Scottsdale, AZ.

I gained valuable experience becoming involved in the Auction trade when it was just developing as a senior consultant for Christie's in New York.

I also had the opportunity to experience working for an Importer, Chateau & Estate wines, who represented many great Bordeaux and Burgundy producers.

What I enjoy most in my free time is hanging out with my Labrador Retrievers, grilling food and enjoying a glass or two of wine.

From 1994 to 2002, Phil moved to the Vons Division office in Arcadia, and was promoted to Fine Wine Sales Manager. His job was to roll out the Fine Wine Program to fifty Southern California stores, duplicating what he had accomplished in his store.

In 2002 Phil was promoted to National Category Director of Wine and relocated to Pleasanton. Phil took his experiences from the Southern California program and applied it to twenty-one states across the country, leading a team of people to become the largest wine retailer in the United States. In 2007, Phil was promoted to Vice President, General Manager for Alcohol and Tobacco and applied his Neighborhood Marketing approach to Beer, and Spirits.

In 2010 Phil left Alcohol and was promoted to VP of Merchandising/Operations for Non-Perishables for the company. His responsibilities included overseeing the merchandising/marketing and the execution at retail. He also led the company's clustering initiatives, and the Premium store project.



Stephanie Rudat

Wine Buyer & General Manager
Ryan's Wine and Spirits, Canandaigua, NY

Stephanie Rudat hails from the Finger Lakes region of Upstate NY. Her grandparents' vineyard's introduced her to the industry at a young age. Harvesting grapes and tending vineyards on Keuka Lake are fond memories of childhood. After college, she took a position as the Tasting Room manager for Casa Larga Vineyards. From there Stephanie moved on to retail at Ryan's Wine & Spirits in Canandaigua, where she has been the GM and Wine Buyer for 14 years. Her career has taken her to South Africa, Argentina, France and wine regions all

over the US. She is married and has two teenage kids. In her spare time, Stephanie journeys to horse events with her daughter who avidly competes as a barrel racer.



Spirits Tasting Competition Judges



Jason Asher

Beverage Manager
Barter & Shake Hospitality, Phoenix, AZ

Jason Asher is a founding Partner of Barter & Shake. A native Phoenician, Jason began working in restaurants throughout his academia years. Graduating with a Culinary Arts degree from the California Culinary Academy, and with over 20 years of hospitality experience, Jason specializes in mixology, spirits, and restaurant and bar operations. He has been featured in numerous national publications, including Esquire, Imbibe, Tasting Panel, Food& Wine, GQ and Saveur. He's also racked up a few accolades along the way, including "Top 100 Culinary Trendsetters" by the Scottsdale Culinary Festival, "Best Mixologist" by Arizona Restaurant Association's Foodist Awards, GQ Bombay Sapphire's Most Inspired Bartender and Food Network's Chopped "Champion." Jason enjoys mentoring his team, traveling the world, and spending quality time with his wife, Kailee, and their family.



Kevin Bratt

National Wine & Spirits Director
Joe's Seafood, Prime Steak & Stone Crab, Chicago, Las Vegas & Washington, D.C.
Beverage Director, Shaw's Crab House, Chicago, IL & Schaumburg, IL

Kevin Bratt is the National Wine & Spirits Director at Joe's Seafood, Prime Steak & Stone Crab in Chicago, Las Vegas & Washington D.C., and the Beverage Director for Shaw's Crab House in Chicago & Schaumburg.

The hospitality industry was a career meant-to-be for Kevin. Growing up north of Seattle in Washington State, Kevin first began waiting tables simply to make ends meet. A football scholarship brought him to Orange City, Iowa, where he attended Northwestern College. During this time, he would frequently make trips up to the Chicagoland area for fun. He quickly fell in love with the Windy City and all it had to offer, especially the growing restaurant scene, and after college decided to make Chicago his new home. Working in the Chicago hospitality industry fostered his passion and appreciation for all things wine and spirits.

In 2000, the iconic Miami restaurant, Joe's Seafood, Prime Steak & Stone Crab was set to debut in Chicago. In need of a Wine Director, Kevin applied for the position and immediate struck a positive chord with the Joe's team. In his new role, Kevin worked to break down the usual stereotypes of sommeliers. He wanted the wine program to be fun, approachable, and exciting for the guests – not intimidating or stuffy. Kevin was empowered to explore new products and labels, and break the mold of the standard steakhouse wine list. When Joe's Las Vegas opened in the Forum Shops at Caesars in 2004, Kevin was promoted to Concept Wine Director, and now oversees the wine and beverage programs in Chicago, Las Vegas, and the newest Joe's location, Washington DC. He has recently added the position of Beverage Director for Shaw's Crab House (Chicago / Schaumburg).

Kevin has been actively involved in Wine Service and Restaurant Hospitality for over two decades and is certified by the Society of Wine Educators and the Court of Master Sommeliers. Additionally, he has consulted for several wine programs throughout the Chicago area, many of which have been commended both locally and nationally.

"I love my job," Kevin states. "It's wine – it's supposed to be fun! It requires me to constantly learn and grow, much like the product itself. I want to ensure each one of our guests is happy with their meal, and thrilled with their wine selection. I am continually working to make our wine program a great extension of the Joe's dining experience."

Kevin currently resides in Winnetka, just north of the Chicago city limits, with his wife Kameron and their two sons, Jens and Owen. He enjoys being outdoors, whether that's snowboarding, skydiving, or anything on the water, namely sailing and surfing. When not diving into the wine cellar at Joe's, you can find him dining around town.



Spirits Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Alec Bruggenthies

Adult Beverage Manager, AJ's Fine Foods, Phoenix, AZ
National Beverage Director, Smith & Wollensky

Alec Bruggenthies has been a wine and spirits professional for the past 20 years. He has called the Smith & Wollensky Steakhouse group home for almost 14 years. His multiple certifications and previous experience at critically acclaimed Ambria and Blue Water Grill have set him up to lead a dynamic beverage program for a traditional brand. Whether it is organizing national wine events for charity, training staff at a new location, or simply pairing a guest's ribeye with a world class red, Alec is always ready for the challenge, and the opportunity to talk about wine.

When he is not at the restaurant or a tasting room, Alec is probably traveling, searching through bins of used vinyl at a record store or exploring new flavors in his [home town](#) of Chicago.



Larissa C Dubose

National Director Beverages
Vino Volo & Paradies Lagadere, Atlanta, GA

Larissa C Dubose is a Wine Educator and business-savvy wine and spirits professional with a unique background in business development in wholesale wine and hospitality. She is the National Director of Beverages for airport concessionaire Paradies Lagardère's Dining Division, including the popular wine bar concept Vino Volo. As the founder and resident wine educator of The Lotus and The Vines, her passion for wine education is clear. She desires to redefine wine culture and bridge the gap from wine novice to connoisseur using the soft skills of wine knowledge and etiquette, empowering a new generation of wine lovers. This effort has been recently recognized in her inclusion of the inaugural cohort of Wine Enthusiast Magazine's Future 40.

Larissa is a Certified Sommelier through the Court of Master Sommeliers, Wine & Spirit Education Trust Level 3, a Certified Specialist of Wine through the Society of Wine Educators, and Champagne Master Level with the Wine Scholar Guild.



Jeroen Erens

Beverage Director
Mercantile Denver, Denver CO

Jeroen Erens is a former 3 Michelin star Sommelier and Export Director for Domäne Wachau, one of the leading white wine wineries in Europe. Over the past 15 years he has worked in some of the best restaurants in the world, travelled to many wine regions from Australia through Napa Valley, competed and judged in multiple wine competitions. His favorite thing to do is educate on Austrian & Hungarian wine.



Spirits Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Nial Harris Garcia

Beverage Director
The Conrad Hotel, Washington, DC

Nial Rhys Harris Garcia is the Beverage Director at the Conrad Washington, DC. Born in Galicia, Spain, Nial grew up surrounded by vineyards in the famed Rias Baixas wine region where his love for wine started early as a helping hand in the annual grape harvest. For the past 20 years, Nial has built a career in hospitality, working in beverage and wine program development in five hotels in two countries. In April of 2015, Nial became a Certified Sommelier by the Court of Master Sommeliers. Throughout his career, Nial has worked at top tier restaurants, including the Michelin Star Blue Duck Tavern where he was an official trainee. He was also part of the team charged with re-launching the famous Watergate Hotel, where his wine program received the Wine Spectator Best Of Award Of Excellence. When not in the dining room, snowboarding or exploring various wine regions, Nial can be found volunteering within the sommelier community at annual exhibitions such as Texsom and SommCon.



Katherine Jester

Buyer & Manager
Kroger Off-Premise, Richmond, VA

After graduating Culinary school Katherine began her hospitality career as a chef. After earning certifications from the Society of Wine Educators and the Court of Master Sommeliers, she moved out of the kitchen to begin her wine journey, expanding into beer styles and specialty cocktails as well as evaluating 10,000 wines over 20 years.

She is currently employed by the nation's largest grocery retailer, Kroger, as an Adult Beverage Consultant and Buyer in the Mid Atlantic Region. There, she works with suppliers and vendor partners to increase brand awareness, promote innovation and provide consumer education.



Bryan Kidd

General Manager
Bob's Steak and Chophouse, Nashville, TN

Bryan Kidd began his career in the bottle-flipping heyday of T.G.I. Friday's as bartender and quickly moved to management. Fine dining, bourbon tasting and top wine service came along with a move to Eddie Merlot's in Louisville, KY. As the Beverage Director, he oversaw the Eddie's Makers Mark Single Barrel selection and earned his position as an Executive Bourbon Steward.

After that, he moved to Morton's Steakhouse Nashville as the General Manager developing the wine and bourbon menus and focusing on staff training.

Finally, he was offered the General Manager's position at Bob's Steak and Chop House. He serves in that position as well as Wine Director.



Spirits Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Elizabeth Kowal

**Certified Sommelier, CMS-Wine Buyer & Marketing Manager
Geneva Wine Cellars and Tasting Room, LLC, Westchester, IL**

I have been honored to compete in and win many blind tasting events and I love the challenge and opportunity to grow in my wine analysis abilities. Most recently, I placed second and won a \$3000 cash prize in the WineRival Blind Tasting Tournament last September. I am thrilled to be chosen as a judge for The Tasting Panel and Somm Journal's wine and spirits competition. Wine education is my passion, and I am continuing my certifications and studies to teach others about wine, both as a working Sommelier and an educator.

About 10 years ago I began studying wine and working in hospitality as my second career. I passed the Court of Masters Certified Exam in April of 2016. I have been the Sommelier/Buyer/Manager of Geneva Wine Cellars, a boutique wine shop and wine bar, since 2014 and the Wine Instructor for the College of DuPage's Wine Appreciation and Knowledge Certificate Program since 2017. As frequently as possible, I attend classes, competitions, tasting groups and trade shows to continue learning about wine and spirits.



Meridith May

**Publisher and Editor-in-Chief
The Tasting Panel Magazine and The Somm Journal, Encino, CA**

Meridith May is the owner/publisher and editor-in-chief of The SOMM Journal and THE TASTING PANEL Magazine. She is responsible for the publications' branding and content and has successfully increased each national magazine's circulation and readership to reach over a million hospitality industry professionals annually. These national publications have evolved to become the fastest growing, most widely distributed for the beverage industry.



Jonathan Pogash

**Founder, Owner and President
The Cocktail Guru™**

Jonathan Pogash is the founder, owner and President of The Cocktail Guru™ - one of the country's premier cocktail and full-service hospitality consultancy companies in the country. He was initially trained by cocktail-world luminaries Steve Olson, Gary Regan, Julie Reiner, and Albert Trummer. Under these legends, he studied technique, cocktail history, fresh ingredients, and seasonality and developed his hallmark techniques.

Jonathan launched The Cocktail Guru in 2006 initially as a side hustle, while he worked as an actor and craft cocktail bartender in NYC. The demand for The Cocktail Guru's services skyrocketed quickly, which turned into a full time, multi-platform hospitality consulting business. Jonathan swiftly assembled an all-star team of world-renowned mixologist, drinks experts, and scholars dedicated to bringing liquid joy and cocktail knowledge to the roster of clients.

Today, The Cocktail Guru is an eclectic collective that has expanded its' offerings. The unique mix of creative, engaging, and informative services that the Gurus deliver are inspirational and impactful. In addition to consulting services for bars, brands, restaurants, and hotels, the team has expanded to accommodate requests for a growing number of special events for the public. The Collective of Gurus offer not only trainings, but menu & signature cocktail development, event hosting, company happy hours, bachelor and bachelorette parties, private parties, weddings, media appearances and more.



Spirits Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Jonathan and his savvy team of Cocktail Gurus execute private and corporate events, design signature cocktails for small to large spirit brands, host team building mixology courses and develop craft cocktail programs for restaurants, bars, hotels and resorts.

Jonathan himself represents beverage brands by leading educational experiences, training bartenders, presenting consumer-facing classes and seminars, and acting as media and industry spokesperson. With nearly 25 years' experience in the hospitality industry, Jonathan shares his insights with the most influential publications from around the world and frequently contributes his unique talents to morning television shows and national radio. His signature cocktails can be seen and enjoyed in many of North America's most upscale cocktail lounges and restaurants.

In 2021, Jonathan and his father, notable author and celebrated spirits industry veteran Jeffrey Pogash ("How to Read a Wine Label", "Bloody Mary") launched The Cocktail Guru Podcast, where they host and toast everyone from spirits industry icons to celebrities.



Charles Rudat

Spirits Buyer
Ryan's Wine and Spirits, Canandaigua, NY

Chuck Rudat, a native of the Finger Lakes region of Upstate NY, was raised in a small town farming community. After two decades of work in telecommunications, Chuck resigned from the corporate scene to follow a passion for small business in the alcoholic beverage industry. Investing three years as warehouse manager and IT specialist at Ryan's Wine & Spirits in Canandaigua led Chuck to a position as a Spirit Buyer where he has spent the last year growing his knowledge to what now includes WSET level 2 certifications in both wine and spirits. In his spare time, Chuck either rides the asphalt on his motorcycle, hits the trails on mountain bikes and dirtbikes with his son, or journeys with his wife and daughter to barrel racing events where his daughter is an avid competitor.



Nancy Sabatini

Wine Director
Mainstreet Wines & Spirits, Countryside, IL

As a fine wine director overseeing over 2,500 bottles, Nancy enjoys matching wine with people and their life adventures. She has been featured in international publications and writes a wine column for local magazines. Nancy attends trade tastings and vineyard visits around the world, including Vinitaly, Portugal, Italy, France, Sicily, Germany, Oregon Pinot Camp Alumni, Washington Wine Road Trip Alumni, Camp Schramsberg, and Argentina, which expands her knowledge of buying wines from around the world. With a long history in the advertising and promotional industry, she brings a creative skill set that rivals most. This, in addition, to her love of wine, helps to further the enjoyment of wine from your home to around the world. Through her charisma and knowledge of wine, she promotes wine harmony in every interaction.





Spirits Tasting Competition Judges (cont.)



Troy Tranzow

Sommelier

Gila River Resorts & Casinos, Phoenix, AZ

Troy Tranzow is an Advanced Sommelier from The Court of Master Sommeliers and is currently pursuing his Master Sommelier Diploma.

Troy has a passion for wine with humble beginnings starting his hospitality career at The Old Spaghetti Factory bussing tables at 15 years old.

Troy began studying wine in 2015 while working as a server at Eddie V's Prime Seafood before being bitten by the wine bug after viewing the Netflix documentary, SOMM.

Since then, Troy has worked at Mastro's Steakhouse, Maple and Ash and currently, Prime, A Shula's Steakhouse, located at Gila River Resorts & Casinos - Wild Horse Pass.

Troy's greatest aspiration is to make wine accessible to all from beginners to wine aficionados.

