

At Copain Wines, SommFoundation chairman Thomas Price, MS (right), demonstrates how to scale blending samples to fill a bottle.



PHOTO: JP WHITLOCK

Hitting the Jackpot

A SOMM CAMP 2024 ATTENDEE SHARES HER EXPERIENCE

by Lesley Neves

I'M NOT MUCH of a gambler, even though I live in Reno, Nevada. When opportunities present themselves, it can be easy for me to downplay my chances. After all, there have been many people who think, based on how I present myself as a queer woman, that I don't have the knowledge or experience necessary for my job as a sommelier. But upon learning about SommFoundation's Somm Camp 2024, I felt I owed it to myself to at least apply for a scholarship to attend the enrichment trip. I had no idea how much my life would change when I became one of the 12 people lucky enough to be selected.

I didn't always like wine or know I wanted to be a sommelier. Initially, I wanted to be a pastry chef, inspired as a child to pursue a culinary career after watching the movie *Ratatouille*. A couple of years ago, burned out from making croissants and wedding cakes, I came home one evening and found a documentary on Hulu that caught my attention: *SOMM*. To say it was revelatory for me would sell

its impact on my career short. As former Master Sommelier Brian McClintic says in the film, "When someone tells you, 'This is something that a lot of people can't do,' people either go, 'Wow, that's impressive' or 'Wow, I want to do that.'" It's easy now to see which category I fall into.

As a relative newcomer to the wine industry looking to expand my horizons and achieve my goal of becoming a certified sommelier, I approached the trip with an open mind. I didn't know what to expect until I received the itinerary and was overwhelmed by the number of producers and vineyards we'd get to visit. Jean Hoefliger of Force & Grace, Rudd Estate's Natalie Bath, Copain Wines' Ryan Zepaltas, and Pride Mountain Vineyards' Steve Pride and Matt Ward are just some of the prolific winemakers that my cohort had the unique pleasure of talking, drinking, and eating with.

The enormity of my fortune in being chosen for this learning experience occurred to me on the first day of the trip,



PHOTO: LESLEY NEVES

John Hamel, director of winegrowing at Hamel Family Wines, preaches the benefits of dry farming and biodynamic practices from a soil pit in Sonoma County's Moon Mountain District.

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during our visit to Hamel Family Wines. We learned how the Hamels studied the centuries of work that Burgundian monks undertook to produce the cru system in order to apply it to their own property. Additionally, director of winegrowing John Hamel explained the theory behind his decision to convert to dry farming while standing knee deep in one of the soil pits dug in the Nuns Canyon Vineyard in Sonoma County's Moon Mountain District AVA. He recalled a conversation with a French winemaker who told him that irrigation can be detrimental to the expression of place: "You might as well put potted plants in your vineyard, because that's how close you're getting to terroir." It's an idea that stuck with him and influenced his approach to viticulture.

Outside of the education we received in cellars and between trellised rows of vines readying themselves for fruit set, a big part of the trip involved the community we were creating. I was nervous about meeting SommFoundation chair Thomas Price, MS, because some part of my mind still believes Master Sommeliers are like gods. After all, they took one of the hardest exams in the world and lived to

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Somm Camp 2024 attendees at Pride Mountain Vineyards.
Back row: Simone Washington, Kate Stirling, and Ryan Sechrest. **Middle row:** Steve Pride, Karla Poeschel, Samantha White, JP Whitlock, Rohan Jolly, and Matt Ward. **Front row:** Thomas Price, MS; Evan Coutts; Jessica Williams; Lesley Neves; Cavitt Bradley; and Nancy Kantz.

PHOTO: JP WHITLOCK



In the thick of the "croquet match of the century" at Sonoma-Cutrer, players Thomas Price, MS; Nancy Kantz; Lesley Neves; and Ryan Sechrest take guidance from the winery's director of hospitality, Mark Elcombe, as Simone Washington looks on.

tell the tale. But by our second day, I had adopted a more humanist view of this industry titan. All it took was being defeated by him on the croquet pitch at Sonoma-Cutrer in what we jokingly described as the match of the century. Between his DJ skills on the bus and his down-to-earth humor, I am grateful now to know him not only as one of the most knowledgeable wine professionals I've ever met but as a

newfound mentor and friend.

On the last day of the trip, we found ourselves straddling the border between Sonoma and Napa at Pride Mountain Vineyards. In the brisk morning chill, valley fog slowly creeping down the Mayacamas, we gathered around director of winemaking and CEO Steve Pride and soaked up his stories. With the giddiness of a child, he bounced between topics ranging from

the effect of elevation on vines to his work with the team at the University of California, Davis, to identify red blotch disease, the latest plague affecting vineyards. From there, we retired to a tasting room in the cellar where Pride and winemaker Matt Ward talked us through the steps of winemaking. The best part was that we each got to make our own blend of Pride to bring home as a souvenir! Measuring and tasting, sipping and spitting, we all gained a better understanding of the work it takes to be a winemaker. It served as inspiration to leave the comfort of my tasting room more often, explore the world, and gain a deeper understanding of the various facets of this incredible field where I belong.

The invaluable experience of connecting with my industry peers from a variety of backgrounds was something I'll carry with me for the rest of my life. These aren't just fellow scholars I met on a trip once but study buddies, mentors, and friends. *sj*

Lesley Neves is a sommelier at The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe, in Truckee, CA.