

# Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Tales Of Two Women In Wine: A Master of Wine and a Master Sommelier  
 "I Am Woman, Watch Me Pour!"

Story by Susan M. Cashin | Photos by Erika Dufour and Courtesy of Barbara Philip

FOR YEARS, WINE HAS BEEN SEEN AS the domain of men. From grape farmers, to winemakers, brokers, and distribution networks and all the way to the sales floor - men have been the main players. Yet, as in many a male-dominated profession, the glass ceiling is being broken. In the case of wine, this has never been more apt a metaphor. Women are the future of the wine market and the time has come for women to explore the wine industry as a career path. Let's look at a few of the statistics.

*Impact Databank Review and Forecast* listed three trends that are driving America's continued interest in wine and its growing consumption rate:

Professional females, who continue to be wooed by wine, will make a substantial contribution to future category growth.

Mounting research suggests a link between moderate wine consumption and good health.

The so-called Echo Boom generation, the children of Baby Boomers, will deliver an additional 60 million potential wine drinkers approaching their 30's to the core consumption demographic towards 2010.

## A MINI PROUST Q&A

**austinwoman:** What is your most memorable or most unusual food and wine pairing?

**Barbara Philip, MW:** Suffering from jet lag in Tours, France I had a one-euro glass of sparkling Chenin Blanc with goat's cheese and fruit preserves. It was just what I needed!

**Alpana Singh, MS:** My favorite unusual wine and food pairing is Champagne and potato chips, but only the Kettle variety. They have to be thick, folded over and crunchy, no Lay's!

**aw:** If you and your husband were stranded on a desert island, what wine and food would you most want to have with you?

**BP:** Nebbiolo may seem a bit drying for the palate, but I think Barbaresco and wild mushroom risotto would keep us going for a long time.

**AS:** I know my husband's answer would be peanut butter and mine would be tuna fish sandwiches. And if I could only have one wine, it would be a '97 Weinbach Pinot Gris from Alsace. Pinot Gris is my favorite wine and I think underrated.

In the end, these core trends point to the prominent role women will play as consumers of wine. Recently *austinwoman* was privileged to talk with two women who have broken into two of the wine world's most male-dominated arenas.

Barbara Philip, in early September of this year, was named a Master of Wine (MW) - the wine world's PhD. Two-hundred-and-sixty-five individuals worldwide have passed the rigorous curriculum and exams, and only 65 females have reached this goal. She is the first female Master of Wine from Canada and a senior instructor and department

head for the International Sommelier Guild (ISG). (Let it be noted that the author had the pleasure and good fortune to have had Ms. Philip as her ISG Sommelier Diploma course teacher).

Alpana Singh received her Master Sommelier (MS) title in 2003 - the youngest female to do so at that time. She is presently the host of the #1 public television program in Chicago, *Check, Please!* and is the director of wine and spirits for Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, Inc. a major restaurant corporation.

We first spoke with Barbara Philip, MW by telephone. It was wonderful to

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hear Philip's soft, mellifluous voice, enjoy her intent listening skills and the articulate responses that spotlight her theater background. A born-and-bred Canadian, Philip found work, as many struggling actors have, in the restaurant industry. Twelve years ago, as acting jobs were shrinking, she asked herself, "What am I going to do with my life, because I don't want to go to audition after audition!"

Her entry into the wine business was not unlike an understudy suddenly being pushed onstage to fill a role. "My friend, who is a chef, called me and said, 'Barb we had to fire the sommelier last night. Can you come in and interview for the position?'" Laughter ensues as she continues. "I can't even remember if I knew back then what the word 'sommelier' meant." She saved the day, won the part and was named Best Sommelier in Canada by 2003. A wine star was born!

Five years ago, Philip began teaching for the International Sommelier Guild, an instructor-guided sommelier accreditation course. "I always had in the back of my mind going for the Master of Wine designation. After teaching and studying wine, I came to see what a broad and complex subject it was and I started my coursework at the end of 2003."

What does it take to become a Master of Wine? According to Philip, be prepared to spend years studying, traveling to wine regions and spending up to \$10,000. But most of all – taste, taste, taste wines and have a partner who is willing to put up with a dining room table continually



Barbara Philip

covered with wine books and strewn with practice essay exam papers. But the work is worth it. On November 1<sup>st</sup> of this year, Philip and her husband Iain will travel to London for her investiture ceremony.

What opportunities does Philip see in her future? "I

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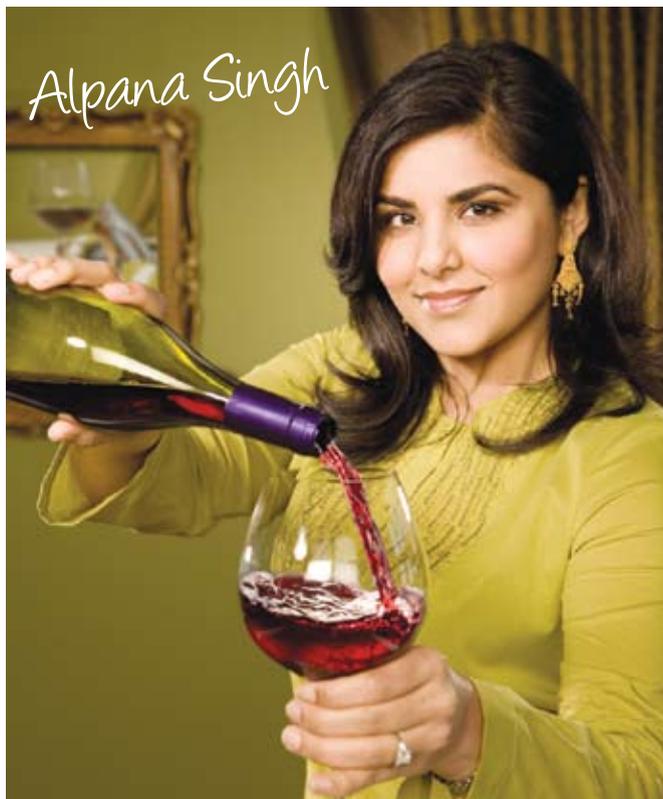
really like teaching and I will always teach. I like sourcing wine products, negotiating prices and buying wines. I also love to travel and I see my future in bringing my skills to the restaurant or retail side of the industry." I see Philip playing the role of a mentor and generous supporter to women who wish to learn, explore and push the boundaries in the world of wine.

Alpana Singh also started off as a server. Her first foray into the world of wine was when, as a college student, she applied to work in a high-end restaurant. During the interview she was asked if she knew anything about wine and she replied, "It's made from grapes, right?" The manager said she would place her name on a waiting list for a hostess. Undaunted, Singh went home and over a weekend studied *Wine for Dummies*. On Monday she wowed the manager and was offered the job. You can enjoy many of Singh's hilarious adventures, experiences, and wine advice in her book, *Alpana Pours*.

Singh was a featured speaker at the TexSom (Texas Sommelier) Conference held in Austin this past August. Opening the conference, she was as crisp, bright, refreshing and beautiful as the wines she presented from Alsace.

"What are the benefits and pitfalls for a woman sommelier?" was the lead question posed to Singh. "I think that if I were a man, I wouldn't get half the attention. The accolades I've received are because I'm a woman, a minority (Indian-American) and I'm young. Of course, I have to back all that up with being good at what I do. You cannot take people for a charlatan ride. As far as pitfalls, I think you have to work harder to prove yourself. Also the high-end restaurant business is perceived as sexy and glamorous and male sommeliers can wear deconstructed suits, a flashy tie, floppy hair and it's perceived as "How Euro!" A female sommelier showing a little décolletage, too tight a suit and a little too much makeup would be perceived much differently. The hours are difficult and not conducive to family life and dating."

But according to Singh, the financial rewards are there and it is an exciting profession. A



Sommelier starting out has the potential to make between \$40K to \$60K salary plus incentives with an experienced sommelier commanding \$80K and up.

Singh also sees that women have a lot to bring to the table in all facets of the wine industry. "I think it's that we understand firsthand what it's like to have somebody assume that you don't know what you're talking about. And so, I think automatically we definitely are a lot more sensitive to others. Not that men are not sensitive, but I don't think they're put into that situation often, and until you experience where someone is trying to make you feel inferior, you don't know how to handle it from the other side.

Her advice to become a Master Sommelier is to, "Taste, taste, taste wine and study! Get a job in a restaurant and surround yourself with good people. Remember that you have to be on top of things when you work the floor. It's easy to fall into the after hours life, so remember it's

somebody's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday once in a lifetime and you're in charge of it!" In short, be focused and professional.

Singh feels that sommeliers are Renaissance people and that's what makes working in the field so interesting. "You have to make a connection with a patron, and sometimes it doesn't automatically happen with wine, so you have to have some other entrée to be able to make a person feel comfortable. I have a colleague who can discuss opera as well as baseball."

Singh listed the many other opportunities open to a Master Sommelier.

You could open your own wine store, work for an international wine import company, open your own restaurant, do consulting and/or training for restaurants or take the corporate route as she has done. The field is wide open and waiting for sharp, energetic and talented women, who love wine and shattering glass ceilings once and for all. Let's all toast to that! ★

## DECANTATIONS

For further information on the wine study programs mentioned in the article, please go to the following websites:

**Institute of Masters of Wine**  
[www.masters-of-wine.org](http://www.masters-of-wine.org)

**Court of Master Sommeliers**  
[www.mastersommeliers.org](http://www.mastersommeliers.org)

**International Sommelier Guild**  
 – Courses available in Austin  
[www.internationalsommelier.com](http://www.internationalsommelier.com)

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