

CHAPTER ONE

Women Need Not Apply

For centuries, biases, traditions, religious practices, superstitions, physical characteristics, and social stereotypes have conspired to keep women from achieving positions of influence in the world of wine. As the wine industry advanced and spread from the Old World to the New World, one theme remained constant: “Women need not apply.”

NICE GIRLS DON'T DRINK

In the aftermath of the Great Flood, Noah planted grapes, made wine, and became intoxicated on Mount Ararat.¹ He's lucky he wasn't a woman, because he would have been remembered more for his inebriation than for his ark. Throughout history, gender distinctions have permeated all aspects of wine—its production, its consumption, its distribution, and its appreciation.

Wine has been “perhaps the most historically charged and culturally symbolic of the foods and beverages with which we regularly have contact.”² Inextricably linked with religious worship, revelry, camaraderie, and upper-class entitlement, wine has often been a beverage reserved for men of privilege. Women, regardless of social standing, were associated with wine's excesses rather than its benefits: inebriated women were fre-

quently linked to indiscriminate sexuality, promiscuity, and adultery. The Roman poet and satirist Juvenal asked, “When she is drunk, what matters to the Goddess of Love? She cannot tell her groin from her head.”³

Wine, known as “the gift of the gods,” helped the ancient Egyptians attain a heightened spirituality. It also was the aspirin of its day, used medicinally to relieve daily stress and alleviate a host of physical ailments. Jars of wine were among the items placed in the tombs of Egyptian upper-class men so that life after death would continue to be comfortable. The social status of the deceased determined the amount of wine used for anointing bodies and entombments. Egyptian women, however, were not entitled to similar benefits for fear they would become intoxicated and act promiscuously in the afterlife.⁴

In ancient Greece, all men were able to experience the reduced inhibitions, greater relaxation, and enhanced social interactions (including sexual relations) that accompanied wine drinking. But the Greeks, like the Egyptians, believed that women had a predilection for drunkenness and excess and therefore frowned on female drinking. Upper-class Greek men also considered women who did drink barbaric because, unlike men, women did not dilute their wine or use additives such as seawater.⁵

The Greeks established the first great male drinking clubs, called symposia, in which wealthy men came together to converse and consume wine. Greek women were allowed to participate only as accessories, as musicians, servers, or prostitutes.⁶ The Greeks understood that such informal social interaction provided the basis for formal political and commercial relationships—and when respectable women were excluded from these interactions and conversations, they were also excluded from political and economic activities. Fraternization in a single-sex environment intended for drinking remains a major hindrance to the advancement of women in all professions to this day.

The Romans replaced the Greek symposia with male gatherings known as convivia, centered on fellowship and wine drinking. In early Rome, prohibitions on female drinking were more severe than those im-

posed by the Greeks: women were not even permitted to serve wine, and until 194 B.C.E. any woman found drinking could be put to death or divorced. Over the years, this unambiguous opposition eased, as wine became a dietary staple. On occasion, women were even permitted to participate in the *convivia*. But Roman men, fearful of female adultery, continued to bar married women from social settings where wine was consumed, establishing a precedent for gender discrimination based on marital status.⁷

Prejudices regarding women and wine continued through the centuries. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, prostitutes were the only women admitted to male-only drinking establishments such as French cabarets and taverns. Married women were not allowed to cross the thresholds even when they needed to speak with their husbands.⁸

Nothing changed as wine drinking spread to the New World. Private gentlemen's clubs and all-male dinner parties were the direct descendants of the earlier *symposia* and *convivia*. The collegiality, intellectual sophistication, and learning long associated with wine consumption remained identified with male-only environments.⁹ Additional, more "modern" biases were added to the longstanding concerns relating female wine consumption. The ability to appreciate wine's nuances became associated with masculinity. Some assumed that women would spoil tastings by wearing perfume that detracted from the wine's bouquet.¹⁰

It is not a great leap from all-male private clubs to male-only winegrowers' associations. Not until the year 2000 did the oldest and most prestigious of the Bordeaux *confréries* (brotherhoods), the Jurade of Saint-Emilion, finally admit its first two women, after eight hundred years of exclusion. It was self-interest that eventually opened up the membership rolls of the Jurade: the organization recognized that its significance was being undermined because it did not include some of the most important wine personalities in Saint-Emilion—who happened to be women. This change is a great affirmation of the achievements of women in the wine world. It is notable, however, that the two female

inductees, Beatrice Ondet and Françoise de Wilde, declined to be labeled as feminists. Ondet remarked, “I am not by any means a feminist. . . . It isn’t a question of sex, but of competence and devotion to the profession. A woman is just as likely to be able to do certain things as well as a man.” Not acknowledging the inconsistency between her disclaimer of feminism and her assertion of equality, she also denied “that she and other formidable women in Bordeaux may have exerted pressure on the gentlemen of the Jurade.” Both women agreed to dress in the same ceremonial robes as the men and to be called *jurat*, a masculine term.¹¹

WINE IN RELIGIOUS RITUALS

Both Jewish and Christian religious traditions incorporate wine into festivities and rituals.¹² Wine drinking has a long history in Jewish tradition: Noah planted grapes and made wine on Mount Ararat, and the two spies sent by Moses to scout the Land of Canaan returned bearing grapes.¹³ Judaism associates wine with consecration and sacraments, including wine drinking in the celebration of the Sabbath and all religious events and holidays. Both men and women are expected to consume four glasses of wine at the seder and prescribed amounts at other rituals such as weddings. Women have a special role at the *bris* (circumcision) of eight-day-old boys: the mother consumes the wine used as an anesthetic when saying prayers for her child.¹⁴

Specifically, Judaism requires kosher wine for all religious functions and for the recitation of the *Kiddush*, the prayer thanking God for the fruit of the vine. Written by the rabbi, philosopher, and physician Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon), the rules defining kosher wine represent the first legal code governing wine production. They provide a clear example that “patterns of wine use . . . typically reveal a great deal about how religious groups go about incorporating new members and, in turn, separating these members from ‘outsiders.’”¹⁵

Unlike the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman traditions, Jewish law does not preclude women’s participation in the winemaking process or den-

igrate female wine drinking. Rather, the central stipulation governing the production of kosher wine is that “the grapes and wine can be handled only by Sabbath observant Jews from grape crushing to consumption, unless the wine is *Mevushal* (pasteurized).”¹⁶ Because women as well as men can qualify as Sabbath observant, gender is not a requisite factor in the making of kosher wine or in serving as the *mashgiach*, the supervisor who ensures that the wine is made in a kosher manner.¹⁷

Historical practice, however, has strayed from gender neutrality. Kosher wine is made exclusively by Orthodox Jews, who have strict rules regarding gender separation. Because women cannot be rabbis within Orthodox Judaism, only men are able to serve as a *rav hamachshir*, the person who determines whether a wine is kosher. Orthodox practice also requires a Jewish man to lead the Kiddush. In practice, then, kosher wine-making is virtually an exclusively male preserve.

Like Jews, Christians also include wine in their rituals. The great Christian theologian Paul Tillich explained the sacramental importance of wine by comparing it to the life cycle: “Only wine of all drinks continues to live and grow in the bottle. First, it is a baby, then it is a child, then it enters puberty and becomes a teenager, then it becomes a young adult, then wine reaches its full maturity, and slowly it enters old age—some wines gracefully, some harshly, and then it dies. Of all drinks, wine alone recapitulates life. That is why wine is a sacrament.”¹⁸

Christianity attributes symbolic importance to wine for the commemoration of Jesus’s first miracle at Cana, where he converted water to wine at a wedding. The inclusion of wine at the Last Supper led to the incorporation of wine into the Eucharist as the embodiment of Jesus’s blood.¹⁹

It is wine’s ritualistic importance to Catholicism, in particular, that caused vineyards and winemaking to be protected after the fall of Rome and eventually introduced to all corners of the earth. The importance of the Catholic Church in the spread of winemaking can be seen throughout the Old World. Great European vineyards on the sites of former monasteries such as Graacher Himmelreich (Germany), Badia a Coltibuono

(Italy), and Châteauneuf-du-Pape (France) bear ongoing testament to this tradition. Much of the New World owes its winemaking industry to Catholic missionaries, primarily male priests, who planted grapes and made wine for ritual use as well as for daily consumption.²⁰

The association of wine with Catholic rituals and the dominance of Catholic missionaries in wine production by definition excluded women, who were not allowed to conduct Mass and who were either absent from the missions or in subservient roles. In California, for example, this legacy continued to adversely affect women's participation in the wine industry until the early 1970s, when the demand for California wine and for workers to produce it made the continued exclusion of women impractical. Other New World nations experienced similar phenomena.

FEMININE WINES AND OTHER FICTIONS

As more women entered the wine world, gender distinctions were sometimes transferred to the wines themselves. Enophiles describe wines as either "feminine" or "masculine," with the latter often considered superior. Feminization of wine is intended as a left-handed compliment that conjures up old social and cultural stereotypes and reinstates the unflattering relationship of women, wine, and sexuality: "Wine itself has many feminine qualities. It is graceful, it pleases, it needs great care and attention . . . and, during its variable lifetime, you never know what it will do next."²¹ The attributes assigned to "feminine" wines abound: soft, elegant, charming, seductive, buxom, sensual, voluptuous, lively, bewitching, fine, delicate, subtle, restrained, showing breed and finesse.²²

Winemaking itself has long maintained a gender-based division of labor. In many instances, only men were permitted to harvest grapes and handle the crush. Women were not allowed to stomp the grapes, in the belief that their physical structure and lack of height would foul the extract. They were, however, permitted to pick and sort grapes, tasks that required patience, delicate hands, and almost maternal caring. Vin

Santo, an Italian dessert wine made in small quantities, actually came to be known as “the women’s wine.”²³ Still, some proprietors did bar women from picking grapes, considering females too chatty and inefficient.²⁴

The most serious handicap encountered by women was lack of access to cellar work, an essential area of experience for anyone seeking to be a winemaker. Women were considered too weak to do cellar work, which involved handling barrels, racking, and working with other equipment. Even with the advent of modern technology that substantially reduced the need for physical strength, this “protection” of women became a subterfuge for discrimination. Rather than being assessed as individuals, women as a class were written off.²⁵

Persistent superstition compounded the problem. In some French wineries to this day, women are not allowed near fermenting wine because of the belief that if they are menstruating the wine might turn to vinegar or referment monthly.²⁶ One French woman winemaker vividly remembers this biased treatment: “*When I started, there wasn’t a field more sexist than vine-growing and enology! At that time, it was said that a woman shouldn’t get into a wine cellar, because if she did, her ‘petticoat’ would make the wine turn sour.*”

Ironically, there is at least one physical distinction that should have worked to the benefit of women: the sense of taste, including the sense of smell. In two olfactory sensitivity studies, one conducted at the Clinical Smell and Taste Research Center of the University of Pennsylvania and the other at the Social Issues Research Centre of the University of Cardiff in Wales, women consistently outperformed men in odor identification and sensitivity on the Smell Identification Test, regardless of age, ethnicity, or cultural background.²⁷ Additional research on taste perceptions conducted by Dr. Linda Bartoshuk, professor of neuroscience in the ear, nose, and throat section of the Yale School of Medicine’s Surgery Department, established three categories of tasters: non-tasters (a projected 25 percent of the population), medium tasters (50 percent), and supertasters (25 percent). The group of supertasters, who

had the most taste buds and the greatest sensitivity to taste differences, was made up predominantly of women.²⁸

Wine tasting, of course, is a subjective experience, a skill that is honed over time. Women may have a natural ability to be better tasters, with more sensitive palates, but their social exclusion from tastings and judging panels prevented them from developing their skills to the fullest. Opportunity, practice, and training have allowed men to dominate a field in which women held a natural advantage. In Australia, for example, women were excluded as judges on the panels of wine shows until 1983. Judging at the wine shows “was the last bastion of male domination in the Australian wine industry guided in principle and deed by an agricultural society rooted in rural conservatism.”²⁹

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Women continue to face obstacles arising from social stereotypes, psychological factors, and role conflicts. Conventional wisdom, for example, holds that women are more averse to risk-taking than men and thus will be less likely to succeed in the uncertain and competitive enterprises of grape growing and winemaking.³⁰ Another damaging assumption is that women cannot manage effectively because men will refuse to work for them. In fact, the large Medoc (Bordeaux) estates do not hire women as managers, in order to avoid these sorts of power struggles.³¹ Even in some areas of the New World, fewer women are found in viticulture, for fear that male migrant workers will not accept them as supervisors. As this book will show, however, the women of today’s wine industry have given the lie to such generalizations—they courageously take the risks necessary for success, they manage large enterprises, and they skillfully supervise both male and female employees.

Although many male-dominated wine groups have become substantially more hospitable to women in recent years, there remains an underlying current of discomfort and a sense of social isolation for many women in the wine world: “*Being a female, I have been underpaid and over-*

worked. My opinion has not been readily accepted by men with seniority over me. I cannot socially join the men winemakers' network. "Social situations are still difficult to comfortably infiltrate." "I often feel I am overlooked or forgotten about when the 'boys' plan an event or a marketing trip."

Women's responses to this lingering discrimination are varied. Some women sulk and become embittered; others feel compelled to deny or downplay their gender ("I am not a woman winemaker; I am a wine-maker"), believing that this is the only way they can gain full recognition for their accomplishments and acceptance on an equal footing with their male colleagues. Many others fight back, both by resisting discrimination and by pushing themselves to higher levels of achievement; the vast majority of women interviewed for this book acknowledge that women must be better at their jobs than men in order to be deemed equal. Some seek to establish women's networks such as La Donne del Vino (Italy) or Vinissima (Germany) to promote equality and provide support for female wine professionals.

Women's unease in the industry is apparent in one striking way: the frequent hesitation of many female winemakers and proprietors to put their own names on their labels. This may stem from a lack of self-confidence or from a reluctance to seem self-promoting or conceited. Most men have no such qualms; they expect to be recognized for their accomplishments from the outset. For women, however, putting their own name on their label is a sign of increased confidence and pride. In fact, one can follow the personal growth of some women by following the changes in their labels. Sometimes it is a case of overcoming an attitude like the one expressed by an Old World proprietor: "*To reach a high position as a professional remains, in our culture, a male prerogative. One day I heard a neighbor saying, 'Be careful not to become a man.'*"

As is the case in every profession, ambitious women sometimes find that their roles as wives and mothers can conflict with their career goals. Family obligations can still be a major obstacle for women's advancement. Although some have successfully resolved these competing pressures, many women connected to the wine world express great reserva-

tions about combining a career with motherhood. As the following comment of a female British journalist reveals, motherhood and its demands can create difficulties between women as well as with male employers: “I suppose there may be women who encounter problems because of their sex. I think I might tend to say it’s because they ‘opt out’—‘My child is crying,’ ‘I’ve got to take little Willy to school’—all that stuff. As I never had children, I don’t know [about those pressures], but I do know that several of the women colleagues here hide behind their brats.”

“WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?”

Given this long history of exclusion and discrimination, it is not surprising that women remain a distinct minority throughout the world of wine. Fortunately for the wine lovers of the world, women’s talent, skill, and dedication more than compensate for their lack of numbers. But even the numbers are changing.

The headline of a 1999 article in *Wine Spectator* by executive editor Thomas Matthews asked, “Where Are the Women?” Matthews bemoaned the lack of women in tasting groups (including his own), their low rates of participation in *Wine Spectator*’s annual Wine Experience, and their underrepresentation on that publication’s subscriber list. He did acknowledge that financial concerns could be a cause.³²

But a better way to view the situation would be to applaud the enormously increased presence of women, compared to their numbers thirty years ago when *Wine Spectator* was founded. The Wine Experience, in particular, exemplifies women’s interest in wine. It is a two-and-a-half-day extravaganza of wine and food costing at least fifteen hundred dollars per person, excluding hotel and travel expenses. Given the substantial earnings gap that still exists between men and women, the fact that women make up almost one-third of the attendees at the Wine Experience is extraordinary. Additionally, although only about 20 percent of *Wine Spectator*’s subscribers are women, the magazine believes that ap-

proximately 40 percent of both the readership and the Web site subscribers are female.³³

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, and now into the twenty-first, women have risen to unexpected heights throughout the wine world. The real answer to the question “Where are the women?”—as this book hopes to show—is “everywhere.”