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These Women Winemakers Are Changing the Way We Drink

by [Charu Suri](#)
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Courtesy Inman Family Wines

Only 4 percent of the 3,700-plus wineries in California are owned by women—Kathleen Inman of Inman Family Wines represents.

Slowly, surely, more and more women are running their own vineyards—and changing the way our wine is made.

When Kathleen Inman, owner of [Inman Family Wines](#) in [California's terroir-rich Russian River Valley](#), wanted to commemorate her 20th wedding anniversary, she marked the occasion with a special 2016 rosé called “Endless Crush.” It was a departure from the typical saignée (or rosé-making) process: strongly structured, delicate, and sourced from organic fruit. It also came in a cheeky screw-cap salmon pink bottle, and it was full of flavor—strawberry, blood orange, watermelon rind, with hints of minerality. In winemaking terms, it was a decidedly New World approach. For Inman, it was all in a day's work.

A [Napa](#) native who earned cred by cultivating a 10.5-acre parcel of land in 1999, Inman is just one of many female vintners and winemakers who are shifting the landscape of how [vineyards](#) are nurtured, and how the wine we drink is crafted. As oenophiles veer away from heavily structured oaky vintages in favor of more delicate, subtle notes (stone fruit, cinnamon, clove, toffee, leather, and chocolate, to name a few), women's winemaking voices are also growing more resonant and relevant.

The global wine market is valued at over \$303 billion, so the stakes are high. Many countries have recognized in recent years that the more traditional model of hiring male winemakers and sommeliers is going through a creative metamorphosis. (In [Argentina](#), for example, Susana Balbo of Medoza is widely recognized as the country's leading winemaker.) Yet based on stats gathered by [Dr. Lucia Gilbert](#), a professor studying women in the wine industry at Santa Clara University, only 4 percent of the 3,700-plus wineries in California are owned by women—though that figure is expected to grow as more women enter the field.

Barriers to entry can be traced to the history of family farms, which tended to be patriarchal operations. “The multi-generational nature of the business has seen more female entrants into the mix,” says Inman. “Of course, it also has to do with the surge of women in the workforce in general.”

One early pioneer in the industry was Hannah Weinberger, who became the first female owner and winemaker in [Napa Valley](#) in 1882. In the 1960s, women started getting degrees in the field, like MaryAnn Graf, who became the first to receive a degree in oenology from UC Davis before working as a winemaker for six years at [Simi winery](#) in [Healdsburg](#), California. (The winery's namesake owner, Isabelle Simi, was known for making wine during Prohibition and storing it in the cellars.)



Courtesy Levin Wines

In France's Loire Valley, female-owned wineries like Levin Wines are starting to emerge.

But there is a disconnect: Even though more women are graduating with degrees in oenology, “they’re still not all getting to top positions,” says Inman. “It isn’t because they cannot make beautiful wines. Partly it’s because they don’t get the opportunity, and there still is a mindset that women shouldn’t be in the cellar or scrubbing tanks.”

Female vintners and proprietors alike pride themselves on knowing how to handle fork lifts and hand-harvest their fruit, as well as their ability to foster a sense of community and mentor talent. Others hesitate to play the gender card, despite [evidence that shows women have more taste buds than men](#)—with a penchant to detect more bitter notes. But “not every woman making wine is a supertaster,” cautions Inman.

Fonda Hopkins, proprietor of [Montesquieu Wines](#) based in San Diego, who owns vineyards in Napa and also sources wines globally, says that “women have a palate

sensitivity that really shows.” Take winemaker Camille Benitah, who was with Merus Wines for a decade before joining Montesquieu, and helped put the 1998 cabernet sauvignon on the map. According to Hopkins, who works with both male and female winemakers, men tend to critique wines using adjectives that focus on structure and power, while “women tend to get excited about the suppleness of the tannins, the mouthfeel, the finesse of the notes.”

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In that respect, women winemakers' detailed approach and nuanced use of language could help tasters pick up on more subtle flavors. “Women tend to make cleaner wines, and even though it sounds like a generalization, they tend to have detail in tasting notes,” Inman points out. But many winemakers agree that in the case of a blind taste test, it is virtually impossible to note which were made by women.

In Europe, the gender shift is happening, though perhaps a bit more gradually. Lynne Levin, who has owned and operated [Levin Wines](#) in [France's Loire Valley](#) (known particularly for its limestone and lovely minerality) for more than 30 years, makes robust vintages from the Gamay grape. “People are looking now for subtler wines,” she tells Condé Nast Traveler. “In France, the wine scene is still dominated by men, but the female vintner tapestry is getting richer, with more women taking risks.” Madame L, a 2010 vintage that is an amalgam of Old and New World vines, is her personal dedication to the modern woman.



Courtesy Lynmar Estate

Lynmar Estate in Sonoma, where "Anisya's Blend" is "dedicated to women of character all over the world."

So what does the modern woman want to drink? When it comes to women marketing wine made by other women, the approach veers toward playful. Vicki Weigle, owner and operator of [La Belle Amie](#) in Little River, South Carolina, a vineyard studded with Muscadine grape vines, says that she has turned tastings into more social events. Weigle created wine labels that are conversation icebreakers, with names that include Old Lucky Guy (a Merlot), Spank Me Pink (a light Southern-style red wine), Queen of Fun (a chenin blanc) and What Was I Thinking? (a semi-dry white). "They're catchy and creative ways to get people thinking and tasting," she says.

Wine clubs, an offshoot of how [vineyards](#) have traditionally sent regular samples to loyal patrons, are now specifically targeting women's palates, too. Erin Vaughen, who started the online boutique [Vinley Market](#) favoring small producers, says she was looking for a fresh departure from the old boys' club approach to marketing wine. Her subscribers pay \$39 per month to receive bottles curated to their tastes—she notes a demand for rosé and sparkling wines. Meanwhile, symposiums like [Women of the Vine](#) and grassroots organizations like WineSense are gaining in popularity; the former will do a livestream during their conference from March 13–20.

Anisya Fritz of [Sonoma County's Lynmar Estate](#) says that the generational shift has also led to an increase in both female educators and wine critics—something that, she believes, will help women gain more recognition across the field. With a long way to go before women truly have a level playing field within the wine industry, even small gestures can help keep that recognition alive: In 2015, Fritz was gifted a 25-acre apple orchard turned vineyard by her husband, and she created a mineral-rich garnet “Anisya’s Blend” pinot noir there. The wine, she says, “is dedicated to women of character all over the world.”