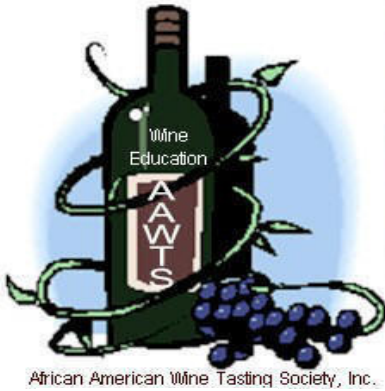


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[The Atlanta Journal-Constitution: 9/12/02]

Toasting diversity Vintage color barrier falls as wine industry looks at ways to be more inclusive

By [REAGAN WALKER](#)
Atlanta Journal-Constitution Food Writer

For someone who doesn't know chianti from cabernet and who thinks "bouquet" refers to a bunch of flowers, a formal wine tasting can be intimidating.

"Add to that being the only African American in the room and the event becomes overwhelming," said Reneé Rowe, 36, of Powder Springs. "I know there are a lot of African-Americans out there who drink wine. I talk to them. I drink wine with them. But when I've gone to tastings, there are few in the room. We just aren't a visible part of wine culture."

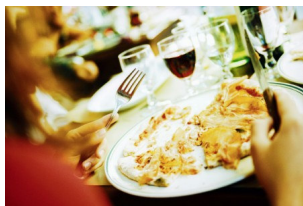
Though African-Americans make up 12 percent of the national population, only 4 percent of wine consumers who drink weekly or at least twice times a month are black, according to the Wine Market Council.

The success of premium wines in the '80s and '90s prompted many winegrowers globally to expand, creating an oversupply. But that sales growth came largely from devout wine drinkers buying more wine rather than from attracting a greater number of regular wine drinkers.

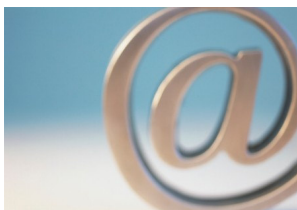
"With a huge abundance, the industry is looking at ways to be more inclusive," Cartiere said. "It's searching for strategic ways to make wine-drinking a part of the American lifestyle, which means appealing to all ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds."

Rowe said her interest in wine was casual at first. She'd bring home wines from the grocery store to try with her brother, husband and friends. Then she began visiting wine stores. Next came tastings and then classes. Then she launched a wine accessories shop on the Internet with her husband, Wayne. And out of a desire to share her passion with other African-Americans, Rowe decided "to create something, not for wine snobs, but for those who've only had white zinfandel from the grocery store."

So in May, the African American Wine Tasting Society was inaugurated at a party at the Shark Bar in downtown Atlanta. Since then, a Web site has been launched (www.aawts.org); monthly attendance is about 30 and paying membership is up to 20 (annual dues are \$50). And friends



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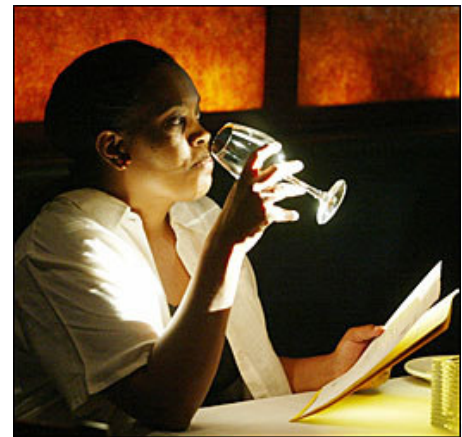
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SKINNER/AJC **Adrienne Starkey** of Lithia Springs samples wine at the Shark Bar during the inaugural meeting of the African American Wine Tasting Society.

PHIL

of Rowe are starting chapters this fall in Hartford, Conn., and New York City, creating the structure for a national network.

"I went on the Internet looking for this kind of thing and was thrilled to find it here in Atlanta," said Marianne Smith, 37, of Lithonia, one of nearly 30 at the August meeting. "I like to drink wine, but it's sort of an upper-crust thing. And it always seemed like there's so much you are supposed to know."

Mainly what Carl Savage, 49, a stockbroker who works in Hiram, wanted to know was "how to swirl." David Foreman was more than happy to show him, also noting that most of the taste of wine comes from the aroma.

Foreman, who works with National Distributing Company, poured eight Australian wines while fielding questions as diverse as "if someone says there are peach overtones, does that mean there are peaches in the wine?" to "is it appropriate to drink port in a snifter?"

No, was the answer to that first question. "Absolutely," was the answer to the last. "Drink it out of a thimble if you want," Foreman told the crowd perched on barstools and relaxed into the couches of the basement lounge at The Shark Bar. "Honestly, what's important is you enjoy it."

Savage enjoyed the wine and the evening so much, he joined AAWTS on the spot, just as Kimberly Gay had done at the inaugural meeting back in May. "I've always liked wine," said Gay, 39, of Stone Mountain. "But I wanted to learn more. It's just nice to be around people you can identify with in a social setting and to feel free to ask any question."

Overcoming the fear factor as well as cultural and ethnic barriers is the challenge before the wine industry, which can no longer rely solely on "aging white men" to keep it going, said Wine Market Report editor Richard Cartiere.

In fact, it was the children of California winegrowers who were the first to tell the industry that wine has a public relations problem. When Jon Sebastiani, Jeff Bundschu and Mike Sangiacomo went off to college, they were surprised to be subjects of ridicule in bars when they ordered wine instead of beer.

So they invited a number of their friends to informal wine tastings, and from there an organization called Wine Brats was formed with the mission of demystifying wine drinking for young adults. Now, there are about 40,000 members nationally and 30 chapters, including one in Atlanta, which will host a major event Oct. 3 at a midtown club, 1150. (See winebrats.org for more information.)

"We are all about peer education. No one talks down to anyone," said Joel Quigley, executive director of Wine Brats. "It's about popping open some Zin, cooking up some burgers and listening to rock and roll."

Chris Hinton, owner of The Wine Store on Holcomb Bridge Road, also faced some ridicule when he first started getting into wine. The former seven-time NFL all-pro offensive lineman and Falcon said as he dined in finer restaurants, he became curious about the wine list. Then, a detour to the Napa Valley on one of his trips to the Pro Bowl in Hawaii really whet his appetite for wine. As he became more of an enthusiast, "my teammates gave me a hard time for sure," Hinton said.

Hinton is the only African American wine store owner in the metro area; there are few involved in distributing and fewer still involved in winemaking, Hinton said. There are at least two African American winemakers in California, and though most South African vineyards have white owners, many winemakers are black.

Hinton said it may take generations for wine drinking to become infused into the daily African American lifestyle. "I didn't grow up drinking wine. A lot of people didn't," Hinton said. "Now you have more and more young African Americans getting into it. But they are more comfortable in their own group, sitting around with buddies at home. The wine industry, I think, is missing the boat. If they did their homework and spent time educating African Americans, it would pay off."

Marlene Rossman, a wine educator in New York, agreed. Rossman once conducted a study in New York wine shops that showed that women and minorities were often treated less seriously, if not less hospitably.

"Learning about wine is not gender specific or race specific. It's not genetic and it's not brain

surgery," Rossman said. "It is an acquired taste. Anyone who wants to learn about it can. That's something that a lot of old dinosaurs in the wine industry need to wake up to."

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