

# SOMMELIÈRE



# IN NEW YORK

Pascaline Lepeltier MS



In the hours before dawn on a warm night last May, I walked out of El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Spain, after an incredible evening of dining. The Catalan spring night was rustling with the noise of the surrounding suburb slowly waking, but I knew I would not be able to sleep any time soon. I was too stimulated. The food and service were exceptional, of course, but what Josep Roca, the *cambre de vins* and one of the three brothers behind this world-famous restaurant, made me feel through his passionate reflections on wines and vigneron, was inspiration. It was the first time I had met a wine director who shared so much of my own philosophy. We talked nonstop through my 19-course dinner. Much of the conversation centered on our responsibility as sommeliers, which extends well beyond providing a fine drinking experience for our guests. “We need to be demanding; we can help improve the way we drink and eat; we can defend the producers who advocate working respectfully with nature,” he said, sharing with me a glass of *Domaine de l’Anglore*.

Heading back to my hotel, I realized that if I hadn’t been forced to be “off the floor,” this much-needed moment would probably never have occurred.

This is how it happened. When Rouge Tomate, the New York restaurant for which I work, closed the doors of the original Upper East Side location a few months ago in order to move to Chelsea later this year, I suddenly found myself with some free time. By contrast, for the past six years, ever since my arrival in Manhattan, I had happily lived and breathed the frenetic life of the wine director of a Michelin-star establishment. We serviced 250 covers a night. I worked 70 hours a week. I oversaw an ever-changing 700-reference cocktail and wine program dedicated mostly to organic, biodynamic, and natural wines. My life was a blur, from cellar, to table, to tasting. Any holidays were reserved for wine trips. My plane often landed in the afternoon, and I rushed back to work the floor, ignoring jet lag and exhaustion. As if this were not enough, I added study to my to-do list: Best French Sommelier and Master Sommelier examinations. I gave all my free moments to blind tasting, books, and flashcards.

All photography courtesy of Rouge Tomate

Above: Rouge Tomate’s mushroom tartare, with which Pascaline might propose Benoît Courault’s 2012 Les Guinechiens Chenin, Vin de France, Anjou; Julien Sunier’s 2012 Morgon; or Salvo Foti’s 2010 Rosato Vinudilice, Etna, Sicilia IGT.

So, with Rouge Tomate in transition, and three months after I passed my MS, all of a sudden I wasn’t preparing for exams. I wasn’t working 14 hours a day. First, I panicked. Then I began to see the huge void that opened up those first few days as an opportunity. I indulged myself. I started to live a wine lover’s life, rather than providing it. I caught up with the wine scene, socializing with my colleagues, talking, sharing, and debating. Unable to stay off the floor, I “guest sommed” in friends’ restaurants and wine bars. I took longer, more extensive trips to vineyards—from New Zealand, to the Finger Lakes; Spain, to Burgundy; Germany, to the Loire Valley. I harvested and blended bourbon. I taught and wrote. And as the world of possible wine opportunities opened in front of me, I came to realize how much I loved my vocation. I longed to be back on the floor, with our guests, my team, and my wine list. Being a sommelier in New York was the best job possible. And ten years ago, I would never have guessed it would be my life.

If I ever wondered whether the role of a chef sommelier or wine director was frivolous, my journey convinced me that the position was not about selfishly buying trendy wines but about being actively involved in a community including guests, producers, and colleagues, to build together a sustainable wine economy. I saw it was possible—Josep Roca was aiming at it, at the highest level—and without forgetting about pleasure.

## The formative years

I grew up in the western side of the Loire Valley, in the suburbs of Angers, the beautiful, medieval, mid-sized town that gave its name to the Anjou region. Though I was raised in a wine region, it took me quite a while to come around to it as my *métier*. Sure, there was always wine on the table, but no one in my family was in the wine business. My mother’s occupation as a plant physiologist was the closest reference point I had to a vine. I can still remember being a university graduate in Nantes and having a bottle of *bourru*—a traditional young Muscadet still full of sugar and fermenting (at that time, I hadn’t a clue about this phenomenon)—explode in my fridge... My journey to wine surprised everyone, including me.

I have always been focused and intense, giving 100 percent to things I was passionate about, whether it was competitive tennis, running, or later, philosophy. I caught the philosophy bug in high school: I was fascinated by the discipline and the

process of critically asking the whole world, “Why?” It definitely shaped my way of thinking. Starting out with the idealism of Plato and Kant, I ended up being influenced by the philosophy of life and will of Nietzsche and Bergson. From quantity to quality, space to duration, this opened my mind to a certain idea of nature and culture. These years were exhilarating for me. But after I graduated, I was hesitant. The expected next step was teaching. I was 21 years old. What did I really know about life? I felt ill equipped to mentor people my own age, much less those older than me.

So, I decided to take a break. I didn’t know it would change my life. Because I had enjoyed summer jobs in a high-end catering company on the Atlantic coast, I gave the restaurant world a try. I liked it so much, I pursued the possibilities.

It’s not easy to change paths in France. The system is built around choosing an orientation early and sticking with it. I couldn’t find a job I wanted, so I decided to go back to school. But even that was difficult: Deans and teachers told me I was an idiot to consider sacrificing a university career in philosophy for what was viewed as a far lowlier and far less intellectual position. I ended up back home in Angers, in the university department specializing in tourism. I convinced them to allow me to complete two bachelors’ degrees in hospitality management in two years rather than the usual four. The best part? Mandatory visits to vineyards and wineries. I immediately saw the direction I wanted to take.

In order to graduate, I needed a nine-month internship. I chose a historic Parisian catering house, Potel & Chabot. I requested a cellar position. In 2005, however, this was impossible. They wouldn’t allow a woman to hold this job (too physically demanding, they said...). Bitterly disappointed, I ended up as a *maitres d’hôtel* supervisor, but I purposefully spent as much time as I could with the wine director. On a Friday of my last month, while preparing for the wedding of Bernard Arnault’s daughter, the *premier maître d’hôtel* in charge of the coordination of the event, who knew my curiosity for wine, came over to my desk holding some plastic glasses and a half-full bottle. It was 1937 Yquem. I took a sip. It was honey and tangerine, and it was 68 years of encapsulated duration. I felt a definite emotional truth. It went back to my philosophical studies. According to Bergson, most of the time, we grasp an object or experience by analytic intelligence, breaking it down into numbers and concepts, forgetting about another way: intuition. I was to find out after pursuing all of my studies that one could do that with wine as well. But when a wine is alive, as that Yquem was, suddenly I could understand it through this intuition—in quality so much more than quantity. This was a vinous, and moving, example of Bergson’s *élan vital*. There was no going back.

That night I told my parents I had decided to become a sommelier, abandoning my academic career for the service industry. With rare exceptions, the role of a sommelier was far from being highly respected at that time, and certainly not well paid. I might as well have told them I wanted to be an actress. They were worried but, nonetheless, supportive. In France there are degrees for everything, and to work as a sommelier I needed to be able to claim the *complémentaire sommellerie*, which combined practical and classroom work.

At 24, I was ancient. Going back to school in classrooms with 16-year-olds was difficult. But it was there I met the teacher who

then became my mentor, Patrick Rigourd. He believed great wine could only be made in the vineyards where biodiversity was respected. Patrick’s generous, open-minded, yet demanding vision became my foundation. My training as a philosopher proved to be translatable after all. To understand wine, you need to grasp the gestalt of biology, chemistry, history, economics, sociology, ecology, aesthetics; you need to use critical thinking and questioning. And in doing so, you can understand that wine can be far more than fermented grape juice, embodying time, landscape, and culture.

Organic, biodynamic, and natural wines came early in my wine education, and they never left. Learning about wine in Anjou—an area that was experiencing an intense rise in more holistic farming in the mid-2000s—was seminal. Patrick gave me access to this world and to the local natural and biodynamic heroes, who listened to and answered my incessant questions. One big revelation came during harvest at Domaine des Griottes (a very hard-core yet thoughtful “natural” estate that has since split), between horses, rows of very healthy old Chenin vines, and bottles of no-sulfur wines, including a Père Hacquet 1959 made from the very same vineyard we were harvesting. Sitting on the top of the hill next to Quart-de-Chaumes in a beautiful, alive vineyard, drinking this wine that could still age for many more years, I saw the one next to it was as lifeless as an asphalt highway. Stripped by chemical farming, the life had been bled out of it. It was a painful moment of awareness. Monoculture and intensive farming put the land and the vines on death row.

Once I understood the importance of the vineyard and the farming, I focused on recognizing enological tricks and understanding complexity. For me it was invaluable to taste with winemakers, to learn with them the deviances, or the potential, of a wine. It became clear that the less the must is chemically manipulated and the more the fruit is grown in healthy soil, the more the wine can express something unique and the less it becomes an alcoholic beverage made from fermented grape juice or a predictable product shaped to please a certain market year in and year out. The wines I felt close to were also very affordable, considering the work involved, sometimes at the expense of financial stability. But these wines were made to be drunk among friends, not to be speculated in for financial gain. I decided then that, wherever I ended up, I would support the people doing the work that I thought was important, those who were committed not only to making beautiful wines but also to taking care of the land and respecting nature.

At the same time, in 2005, I was apprenticing in a two-Michelin-star restaurant hidden away in Brittany, where the chef-owner was Jacques Thorel. Thorel loved to work with women! He didn’t reject me, as others did, for being an “overeducated wannabe *sommelière*.” Which was lucky for me, because he curated one the greatest classic wine lists in France, as well as one of the most impressive cookbook collections. I know that “curated” is almost a cliché, but I believe it is a worthy descriptor for collecting and organizing with a purpose, whether it be art, books, or wines. The point is not to show everything but to narrow the focus, to edit in order to reveal an ideal or meaning. His list was about showcasing the complexity of what he considered exceptional cuvées or crus through deep verticals. Self-taught, he built at l’Auberge Bretonne a 3,000+ reference cellar where wines were often kept a couple of years before being offered—a practice almost unheard of in the

United States. Being there rounded out the natural wine knowledge I already had with the classics. There were verticals of Domaine d’Avenay, Jayer, and Lafon, of Bordeaux crus classés, Egon Muller, Vega Sicilia, Musar, and Ridge. He also appreciated more edgy wines, such as those from Overnoy and Seloisse, old Muscadets, some rare Sherry, Vintage Ports, and 1930s Chartreuse Tarragona, among many other emblematic wines and spirits.

Monsieur Thorel had a fantastic palate. He knew very well how to assess the aging potential of a wine. He was a smart, patient buyer, who was very well connected, too. He created his own inventory software. He read Tanzer and Parker. He knew the auction price of his wines, when to buy and when to sell, managing his inventory in order to have enough cash flow to put wines on his list when he thought they were ready. Every reference on his list had a purpose for being there and was considered by him to be a benchmark for its appellation. He regularly traveled to the vineyards, tasting from barrel and keeping a direct contact with the vigneron. It was an important lesson: Business acumen and curation were intrinsically linked.

But his conservative clientele was not open to the idea of a young woman sommelier. They often waved at the *maitre d’hôtel*, who might be carving a leg of lamb, to ask for his wine recommendations, while I was standing at the table ready to help them. I had no choice but to prove I could handle the physical part of the job and the heavy wine list. I had to learn very fast—appellations, crus, the differences between vintages, et cetera. Because I hate being a beginner, I gave myself a crash course: I worked all the time, taking notes of the wines I was tasting during the service and doing research as soon as I was home in the middle of the night.

### Rouge Tomate

I could never have progressed if people had not believed in me, if they had not given me opportunities. Monsieur Thorel was the first. The second was the founder of Rouge Tomate, Emmanuel Verstraeten. He hired me over many other people with much more experience to create and write a health-oriented beverage program, with an organic focus wherever possible.

In 2007, I commuted between the restaurant in Brussels and the office in Paris, working with a team of nutritionists and chefs to develop a scientifically validated beverage charter based on a food philosophy called SPE®, Sanitas Per Escam or Health Through Food. The idea was that one could eat better, healthier, and in a more sustainable way without compromising taste and pleasure by thoughtfully sourcing and preparing high-quality, nutrient-dense ingredients, enhancing their value by combining them carefully. My job was to apply these principles, based on the most updated scientific literature, to the world of beverages. It was a fantastic research project, but one that had to be conducted behind a desk and quite far from the floor.

Above: Rouge Tomate’s Hawaiian walu crudo, with which Pascaline recommends Hofgut Falkenstein’s 2013 Niedermenniger Herrenberg Riesling Kabinett Trocken, Saar; or La Grange Tiphaine’s 2008 Les Grenouillères Demi-Sec, Montlouis-sur-Loire.



That same year, as we prepared for a Rouge Tomate debut in New York, with barely a year of professional experience, I had the insane idea to enter the Best French Sommelier competition. I didn’t think I would qualify, but having a competitive goal was the best way I knew to improve. I was shocked when I passed the selection for the 2008 semi-final.

I knew I needed help, so I begged the best sommelier team in Paris for it. Eric Beaumard, 1998 runner-up in the Best Sommelier in the World competition and general manager of the two-Michelin-star Le Cinq at Le George V, agreed to coach me. I spent a couple of months with them, not only preparing for the competition but also learning the art of service in an exceptional, world-class establishment. The training paid off: I made it to the final round, the first woman ever to do so. (I was to enter this competition two more times, in 2010 and 2012, with the same result, being the only woman each time. It was very rewarding, yet frustrating, since very little feedback was given—other than perhaps I was in the wrong field, I was too enthusiastic, and I should wear makeup and a shoe with a heel. By 2012, this kind of depressing criticism began to pall, and I decided to take a break from the competition.)

I arrived in New York in 2009. At last, being a woman was no longer a problem. The wine community was collegial and exciting. But I still faced many challenges—not least my accent. Nobody could understand me, and vice versa. The cultural gap was tangible, my very French romantic idea of the job being secondary to my colleagues’ pragmatism. The first months were very rocky. My staff and guests were resistant to “organic” wines, believing they were all oxidized and flawed. (Natural was not yet trendy, so they were not scared of it and you could get cases of the now tightly allocated Overnoy and L’Anglore without any difficulty.) I was working in the wealthiest zip code of the town, where conventional status and fancy prices mattered far more than quality. Buying in New York was also more complex than in Belgium or France, where no New York-style three-tier-system exists and where allocations are determined not by the distributor but by the producer. And last but not least, I had to be a beginner once again. I knew natural and French. But New World wines? Not so much. I had to step up to the level of the

New York scene. Alice Feiring, a preeminent wine writer and natural-wine advocate whom I had met by chance a couple of months previously in Paris, helped me a lot in many ways. For one, because she had a very similar vision of wine, she could help me find the people in the New World who worked naturally. Then one of the very few women Master Sommeliers, Laura Maniec, owner of Corkbuzz Wine Studio in New York, encouraged and then mentored me through the Court of Master Sommeliers program.

Studying for the MS was a very personal yet humbling exercise in self-discipline. But it also opened my mind to wines, subjects, and people I would probably never have considered otherwise. As a lover of low-intervention wines, it kept me tasting and studying other products that, in my reverse snobbism, I would have despised. It took me five years to pass. Because I had to rush back from the exam in Aspen, Colorado, to work, I was on the floor when the successful candidates were announced. I was “pinned” during service. It meant a lot to me to be surrounded by my team and my guests for this moment, because it could not have happened without their support. Some people have begun to question the current value of the MS qualification, but through it I have gained a huge amount of knowledge and a vast network of contacts in the wine world from all over the country. It is a very rewarding journey. As in any other field, the title does not guarantee competence. You may know all the crus of Serralunga, but if you don't care about your guests on the floor or the wines on your list, you are not worthy of the term master, still less sommelier.

### On the floor

As a wine director, I love to see people return over and over again to share a dialogue about wine. It's about the long-term relationships, regulars, in all aspects of the business—with colleagues, guests, producers, suppliers, and wines. I live for this. But in a city like New York, where trends, turnover, high-speed inventory rotations, and return on investment seem built into the business structure, it is a challenge.

Initially, Rouge Tomato did not have big plans for its wine program. Wine was not to be the center of attention. But as long as my numbers were profitable and good, I was free. At the beginning, the list was small and the budget tight. I wanted to offer a story by selecting wines that made sense to me, bottles representing a highly drinkable, unique expression of the wine world. Ideally, each had a reason to be on the list, based on multiple criteria: the ethics and farming of the producer; quality and value; and the ability to be paired with Rouge Tomato's food. The list was meant to offer a wine for everyone, with no region, variety, or vintage excluded. I did not want the wine list to be too esoteric, because I was the only sommelier on the floor to explain and sell. So, I organized the list to be user-friendly for my guests and my staff, grouping the wines by region and weight, indicating their farming practices.

I then developed some sections of the list—first, the region I knew the best, the Loire, because the valley offered extraordinarily versatile, underrated, well-priced gems that worked well with our food. I put on a whole section of Chenin Blanc. I also listed back vintages. I looked into New York State wines and increased our local selection. The by-the-glass section was my laboratory: I knew I had to have a core of safe bases (a Sauvignon Blanc, a Chardonnay, a Pinot Noir, a Cabernet Sauvignon, a Champagne), but from there I realized I could offer less familiar varieties or regions—from southwest Abouriou, to Hungarian Somlo, to Melon de Bourgogne from Willamette Valley—as long as they overdelivered. The by-the-glass section was also the base of the staff training. We tasted every day at lineup and went deeper during the weekly wine class, often with winemakers who happened to be in town. As time went on, the staff education paid off. They became more excited and involved. I taught them to treat every wine we had, whether a Vin de France or a grand cru, with the same consideration. We worked on the psychology of our guests: how to read a table and pay attention to details; how to offer the genuinely best option at the best price in order to gain the guest's trust; how to be able to tell the story behind the label.

And so, the wine list grew as I became more confident, understood more and more my guests and my team, and discovered new wines almost every week, thanks to the insane amount of tastings and seminars organized daily in Manhattan. I gradually eliminated certain wines I was told I had to have. They might have had famous names, but their idea of farming or marketing was not in sync with the vision of the restaurant. I felt the wine list needed to be even more a reflection of the philosophy of the food. There is often this disconnect: We eat local, we praise sustainable and are aware of the problems of modern agriculture; but when it comes to wine, the brand is often more important. I reject this. I want to bring the wine

in line and to curate the wine list in such a way as to offer a depth of vintages and people, to reveal the connection between history, economy, and farming. I decided to organize wine dinners and events that would support this philosophy. For our very first dinner in 2009, I welcomed Tony Coturri, a pioneer of natural farming in the Sonoma Mountains, California; for our second, Frédéric Lafarge. We hosted seminars, tastings, and lectures about biodynamics—it was pretty intense to have, in the same room at the same time, Nicolas Joly and Pierre Breton from the Loire, Ales Kristancic from Friuli, and Stéphane Tissot from the Jura, all talking and sharing their wines. But it felt right. Our guests loved it.

When we started tasting menus, the wine pairings became my stage. I worked very closely with my chefs to make them as complementary as we could. The food was complex, subtle, and deliciously naked, because the food avoided flavor-hiding layers of cream, butter, or salt. I had a blast finding the right partners. These constraints allowed me to do some of my best pairings. One of my favorites was with our summertime trio of *amuse bouches*—local oyster with strawberry mignonette, crispy ginger and tarragon / white asparagus panna cotta / American sturgeon caviar farm egg, spring onion, English pea, chive. I paired it with a 2013 biodynamic Frontenac Gris Pet' Nat produced in Vermont by an exceptional vigneronne, Deirdre Heekin. (By the way, Vermont is one of the less hospitable wine regions to farm biodynamically.) The lively texture of the wine, the soft bubbles, the fresh red fruit/herbal profile of the aromas, and the salty finish were just perfect with the trio. The wine was great, the story and the soul behind it even more meaningful. It became a guests' favorite. Another one was with a custom-made vermouth, produced in Brooklyn by Bianca Miraglia's Uncouth Vermouth, using only locally foraged ingredients and no additives. Knowing Chef Bearman would put on the menu an *ajo blanco* gazpacho, we created a Finger Lakes Riesling-based, hops and crab-apple vermouth. Guests couldn't get over the combination. Satisfying? Very.

The wine program and the staff education continued to pay off. We started to sell a lot more bottles, with regulars coming back for a “wine experience.” It was difficult to keep up with the hours on the floor—staying late if a customer wanted to do a six-flight Chenin tasting at 11pm, leaving the restaurant at 2am only to go back at 10am the morning after to receive deliveries, enter invoices, change the list, taste with suppliers, prepare tasting sheets, and be ready for lunch service. I had to prioritize and structure the program to avoid chaos. First, by keeping a tight storage, inventory, and updated wine list, to avoid '86s or poorly cellared bottles. Second, by teaching staff and managers about our wines, especially by focusing on variations and getting them excited to work with “alive” wines (caring about the glassware, temperature of service, pairings, and so on), so they could also recommend wines when I was not available. Third, by running a financially successful program, the keys to be able to offer an independent selection at a reasonable markup. And fourth, by continuing to learn, taste, and look for wines.

I knew I could offer alternatives to my customers, often with better quality and value. I wanted my prime relationship to be

Left: Rouge Tomato's spring pea risotto, ideally paired, Pascaline suggests, with Camin Larredya's 2013 La Part Davant Jurançon Sec; or La Clarine Farm's 2013 Josephine + Mariposa, Sierra Foothills, “a red I love and that works with this dish.”

with the producer rather than the importer or distributor, so I'd continually travel to maintain my contacts. In order to have the wines I wanted, I ended up working with more than 80 distributors and auction houses (which seemed insane to my accountant). If an importer gave me a difficult time, I could go directly to the producer. Allocations are a battleground in New York—for example, for some wines, my allocation was cut from one case in 2009 to one bottle in 2014. Two or three years ago, I found myself so upset by this that I would try any means to find the wine, almost whatever the price. Today, I've changed. I don't want to be part of that speculative “must-have-it-or-die” game. If I am unable to secure a wine because of rationing and overpricing, I look for another producer—maybe less sought after, but available and often of equal quality and better value.

When Rouge Tomato closed for the move in August 2014, we had the team and the drive I was looking for. The wine list was a good first draft of 800 references, and taking a cue from Monsieur Thorel, I had 1,000 more quietly bidding their time. They will soon be in their new home, one more fitting for the Rouge Tomato vision, where we will reach a far wider audience than ever before.

### Doing everything right

New York right now is bursting with sommeliers and wine lists of all shapes and sizes. There are amazing programs. Here you can find all the wines you can imagine. So, I don't understand why some lists still fail to offer a clear point of view. Too many wines appear to have been chosen according to fad or fashion or profit potential. Often, they are overpriced, not handled properly, or both. Do you really have to put on your list your allocation of Thierry Allemand, because you just received it, with a markup five times the cost price? Maybe not. Maybe you should wait a little and price it more reasonably.

Being a sommelier is, in that sense, pretty easy: It is about opening a bottle at a specific time and serving it at a price for a guest. The complicated part is doing everything right, every time—the right bottle, at the right moment, served the right way, at the right price, to the right guest. This requires responsibility, education, memory, time, psychological understanding, and the humility, patience, and sensitivity to listen to the guest.

That spring night at Can Roca, I was welcomed not by a glass of Champagne, as the guests sitting next to me were, but by a glass of Alta Alella Cava Brut, organically made with no added sulfur dioxide. Josep knew this less fancy but delicious wine with a unique story would better satisfy my thirst and my curiosity and would make me happier. If a wine could symbolize what he was doing at Can Roca, he said, it would be a Cava—a wine made with three humble grapes grown there, under the Catalan sun, transformed thanks to time and alchemy into a complex, multidimensional sparkling wine. Like the three brothers transforming their parents' popular little restaurant into one of the most brilliant establishments in the world—still located in one of the poorest suburbs of Girona, where they can still be involved in their local community, supporting education and ecological preservation.

This fall, I get to go back on the floor after a year-long journey, in a restaurant that I helped create and design. I hope it will feel like that sip of Cava, full of emotion, truth, and pleasure. ■

