

# The African-American Wine Drinker

By Eunice Fried



**W**ine may have a passionate following, but that passion is in the enthusiasm, not in the numbers. Of all Americans who drink beverage-alcohol, only about ten percent drink wine. Could it be that the wine industry has set its sights on too narrow a consumer base? And if so, wouldn't it gain both richness and benefits if more African-Americans were consumers?

According to the MFK Research in its U.S. Wine Demographics Report, of those Americans who do drink wine, 77.6 percent are white, 9.8 percent black and 8.8 percent of Hispanic origin. Compare this to the country's overall population - 72 percent white, 12 percent black and 11 percent Hispanic." The report goes on to say "while this disparity may not seem significant today, it is likely to become much more significant in the future as minority groups are growing at a much faster rate than whites, particularly in large metropolitan markets and states such as California and Texas."

The Question: what can the industry do to increase wine awareness among African-Americans? And why has it not done more? One answer is that African-Americans are no different from other consumers - some are wine knowledgeable, some enjoy an occasional glass and some neither know nor care about wine. True, but while the wine sophisticated African-American may tell the wine innocent African-American, "You don't know what you're missing," he would do better to tell it to the trade.

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Examining the industry's efforts to attract more minorities to the pleasures of wine, there is little question that there is major work to be done. As Peter Morales, president and founder of "57 Main Street" Wine Co., a joint venture between Peter Andrew, LLC and KWV International of South Africa, says, "The term black wine expert seems to be a disconnect to the industry."

Andre Shearer, the man responsible for forming Cape Classics, the first import company in the U.S. to bring in high quality South African wines after apartheid ended, agrees. "The African-American market is one of the more undervalued, underserved, under-targeted segments in the United States." As a South African who has worked here for a decade, Shearer believes marketers in this country are unaware of the MFK findings. "They don't seem to realize that demographically, the American consumer is becoming much more the African-American consumer. We must take a more targeted approach to reach out to them, through African-American societies, clubs and publications, for instance. And we must engage more blacks in wine selling. I'm looking for South African blacks living in the States to work for me; I want them on my sales staff."



Art galleries and museums exemplify venues preferred by Tenfolks, a New York-based networking company geared towards young, professional African-Americans for its wine tastings.



For Peter Morales, one way to do that is through “cultural literacy” which means that people who market wines need to understand the profile of the potential consumer, understand the cultural bridges that make them different and then recognize the similarities. “The industry in the U.S. must drop boundaries that assume certain people don’t drink certain products, like cork-finished wines or Cabernet, for example.” Like Shearer, Morales is working to break down one boundary in wine by employing a multi-cultural sales team. “It adds another dimension. If we could break through more boundaries, we could really start to build a more robust wine market.”

These boundaries extend beyond wine. As an example, Morales points to the assumption that blacks don’t ski. Wrong, he says. “There is a black men’s ski group, for instance, that went out West to ski last season, and during their stay, they spent \$9 million. These are avid skiers but they are not depicted buying ski clothing and ski equipment and taking ski holidays.”

African-Americans have a spending power of over \$500 billion a year, and a little over \$100 billion of it is dedicated annually to beverage alcohol, hospitality and entertainment. Morales cites an important point the industry should not forget: African-Americans tend to buy the best brands. “But where are wine and spirits advertising budgets going? Morales asks, “Beer, Colt 45 and highly fortified wine.”

Charles Stanfield is the wine buyer for Champagne, South African wines and kosher wines at Sam’s in Chicago, one of the largest wine stores in the country, and an African-American who has been in wine retailing for 18 years. “America is just getting a wine/food culture and it’s still trickling down to certain demographics. You don’t know much about wine if you’ve had a lack of exposure to the culture, no matter what the race.”

Stanfield emphasizes the role that status plays for African-Americans when it comes to choosing wine. “We have people drinking Cristal only because they see young entertainers drinking Cristal. It’s a fashion statement: ‘I have my expensive car, my expensive shoes, my expensive Champagne.’ We people of color have to quit being sold and start becoming educated.”

Wine education has been Patrick Fegan’s calling card since he created the Chicago Wine School, the city’s only year-round wine education source, in 1984. But African-Americans still account for only about three percent of his students. “It could be economic, or cultural, or it could be the marketing of wine in this country. Here in Chicago, the marketing effort has gone into inexpensive stuff such as Wild Irish Rose. On the other hand, there’s the Cognac ads that say ‘I assume you drink Martel’ with a black model. That’s targeted and it has worked. If marketers are going to target, they might open their eyes a bit more.”

Which is exactly Jabulani Ntshangase’s point. The managing director of Thabani, the only wholly black-owned winery in South Africa now available in the U.S, believes the right approach to use in this country is the one he applies in South Africa. “We

Patrons enjoy Tenfolks' "Wines of Spain" tasting held at the Schomburg Center in Harlem.



need to inform them. They must be made to feel part of the industry. The spirits industry targets ads to black neighborhoods. That's why the spirits market is bigger with African-Americans than wine. Putting African-Americans in wine ads would engage them and make them feel part of the wine world."

"And make them feel comfortable," adds Joseph DeLissio, wine director of The River Café in Brooklyn and author of *The River Café Wine Primer*. "Certainly, African-Americans who come to the River Café are perfectly comfortable around wine. They've been exposed

to wine; they know wine and they have no problem ordering fine wine. That's why I think you have to begin with the education in black neighborhoods. I've gone to wine shops and restaurants in neighborhoods that have a large African-American population, and for the most part, their wine selection is horrible. That's partly the industry's fault."

What can the industry do? DeLissio believes it can begin by acknowledging the involvement of African-Americans already in the industry and seek out African-American salesmen, sommeliers, and winemakers and bring them into the public eye. "Remember, if we go back 30, 40 years, most middle class white Americans were no different; very few knew anything about wine," DeLissio says. "It's the same thing now, and the way to pick up that lag is with the same dedication. It's begins with education so that they can be comfortable with wine."

It is also incorrect to stereotype the entire ethnic group. "African-Americans are as varied a population as any," says Larry Stone, wine director at Rubicon in San Francisco. "I know many African-American wine collectors. I know African-American sommeliers - Mason Smith, who is one of my sommeliers is one of the great

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- Larry Stone, wine director at Rubicon in San Francisco

est tasters I've ever trained. To stereotype a consumer is unfair and dangerous. A restaurant's staff should never approach a table with prejudice. We often get so snobby in wine service about what people are drinking.

Curtis Green is the creator and principal of Tenfolks (Tasting Education and Networking Folks), a company based in New York whose wine events, seminars and classes are geared to African-American professionals age 28 to 55 with average incomes of \$70,000. An African-American wine lover who worked in government and politics for 15 years,

Green bases his company on the premise that; "First of all, African-Americans enjoy wine in greater numbers than might be assumed by the wine industry and secondly, we feel we understand their life style and interests. Settings and cultural relationships are very important to the comfort level of African-Americans. So our concept is to offer a venue outside of bars and restaurants where they can enjoy wine and at the same time, connect socially, culturally and professionally." Currently, Green's mailings reach 1,500 people. "We plan to launch events in other cities, beginning with Washington and Philadelphia. Our ultimate goal is to grow a national network of African-American wine events."

We cannot change things with the same old song and dance. And the wine industry cannot draw new consumers with the same old ads and attitudes. If it makes the right moves, though, and offers a warmer welcome to more African-Americans, it may very well change the dynamics of the wine world.

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Eunice Fried is a writer and lecturer whose articles on wine and food and personalities have appeared in *Business Traveler*, *The Preferred Way*, *Quarterly Review of Wines*, *Seasons*, *Elle*, *Gear*, *More*, *Guest Informant* and *TravelClassics.com*. Her last book was "Burgundy: The Country, The Wines, The People."