

than ever, the number of traditional media outlets for wine writing has declined. There are fewer newspaper wine writing jobs, for example, and fewer newspapers, too.

There is more wine content available to consumers than ever before, but much of it is on the web and provided for free by both professional and amateur authors. Some of the amateurs are highly qualified, of course, but their freely provided content makes earning an income in this field more difficult.

The internet and the move to mobile communications are disruptive technologies generally and the wine writing business is no exception. That said, disruption creates both challenges and opportunities and the key lies in choosing a strategic response.

Lesson Two: How Wine Writers Are Like Actors

Wine writers are a little like actors from an economic point of view. The most commonly repeated line among aspiring actors, it is said, is something like “My name is Robert and I will be your waiter tonight.” Day jobs may suck, but having a secure source of income is very useful. Being an actor is hard. Making a living acting is even harder. Ditto wine writing.

A small number of wine writers do very well indeed! They work very hard and earn good incomes, achieve a certain level recognition and even celebrity. Most wine writers, however, work very hard and scramble to scrape together a living with multiple jobs and non-wine writing projects — the economic equivalent of an actor’s waiter gig.

Even the most successful contemporary wine writers pursue multiple disciplines, however, generating content for newspapers, television, the web and organizing sponsored tastings, wine classes, consumer programs and much more. Jancis Robinson used to jokingly refer to her wide-ranging set of activities as “the empire” although an economist would recognize it as a diversified business model built around a core expertise.

Hong Kong-based Jeannie Cho Lee MW’s “empire,” for example, includes books, university teaching, her food and wine website AsianPalate.com, a job advising Singapore Airlines on their wine selections, a television series, magazine articles and much, much more.

Support yourself with a single type of work (magazine editor? wine book author?)? Yes, it is done — Eric Asimov, the chief wine critic of the *New York Times* is an example — but that’s the exception not the rule. Need to create that diversified empire. And then hope for some luck, too.

Lesson Three: No Single Path

There is no single sure path to success in wine writing. Some of the top people in the field are Masters of Wine or Master Sommeliers, for example, but others like Asimov are self-taught. That said, I noticed that a great many of the talented “students” were seeking WSET credentials. The detailed wine knowledge is important, of course, but this is also a way to signal potential clients of serious commitment, which is useful in a crowded and competitive marketplace.

It seems to me that many of the successful writers leveraged specific assets effectively. Jamie Goode was a successful science editor, for example, and the scientific foundation of his writing clearly differentiates his product. Decanter contributor Jane Anson's deep knowledge of Bordeaux gives her a comparative advantage.

The day of the generalist (I am thinking of our fantastic keynote speaker Hugh Johnson, who seems to know everything about wine) seems to be passing or perhaps has passed as a business model.

Specialization is important, whether by market segment, winemaking region, or wine issue area. But, as noted above, the ability to make connections and to communicate across several platforms is also critical to success.

Lesson Four: Passion is Not Enough

The writers we met who seem to have the greatest success share drive and passion, but they are also strategic in the way that they invest their time and other resources, entrepreneurial in seeking out and making their own opportunities, and multidisciplinary. They leverage their core comparative advantage effectively to make themselves valuable to clients and readers, not simply to be more visible to the public.

Let me repeat part of that. They think about their clients and audiences and what they can do to create value for them. Then, of course, they have to persuade their clients of the return on investment and convince them to share some of those returns with them.



More work is needed to measure the value created by high quality wine communications and to distinguish it from freely available web content, for example. The statistics we heard about low and stagnant “dollars per word” freelance writing rates suggest that professional wine writing has low value, that its value is not widely appreciated, or perhaps that professional writers are in a weak negotiating position when it comes to writing fees. (Alder Yarrow argued that this is due to an over-supply of wine writers.)

Lesson Five: The Value is There

Ironically, even as the average return to professional wine writing has declined, its importance to the industry has actually increased as the wine industry becomes more competitive with other sectors that compete for sales and attention.

Wine writers tell wine's story and story-telling is a valuable skill. Consumers do not just sniff with their noses and slurp over their tongues. Lots of things smell good or taste good. The key, it seems to me, is to engage the imagination and take wine enthusiasts on a journey and the people we met at Meadowood and others like them are skilled and valuable guides.

Or at least that's the lesson I take from the substantial investment made by the symposium sponsors. Napa Valley Vintners, Meadowood and the CIA will get some direct publicity from the symposium itself (this column, for example) but the real payoff comes down the road as all the participants become more effective in their work and better able to tell the Napa Valley story and the story of wine more generally.

The sponsors actually kicked up the investment a notch this year. In the past most "students" paid symposium expenses while a small number received fellowships to offset cost. This year a new "all fellowship" model was rolled out, with fewer "students," high admission standards, and full-tuition fellowships. Plans are coming together to build an endowment to sustain the full fellowship model into the future. I like the forward thinking behind this.

There was a lot to absorb at this conference and I am only scratching the surface here, but these are some of the things I think I learned at Meadowood.

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Thanks the symposium's organizers for inviting us to take part and to the sponsors for their generous support of the program. Thanks, as well, to all the Napa Valley wineries who donated the wines we used in classes and the meals and receptions. Shout-outs to so many including especially Jim Gordon, Julia Allenby, and Antonia Allegra.

Sue and I also want to thank Cain Winery for inviting us to an intimate dinner they hosted at Terra Restaurant in St Helena where we had a glorious meal and tasted Cain Five wines from 1986, 87, 97, 98, 2006, 07, 10, 11 and 2012. It was an awesome experience. Thank you!