

UN CORK BROKEN EFFECT

The wine industry's past could be considered stuffy and at times even elitist, but that is changing — a growing number of organizations are hard at work creating a more inclusive future for the next generation of BIPOC wine industry professionals.

By Keri Bridgwater
Photograph by Justin Buell



Melanie Wilkerson
EXECUTIVE SOUS
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lack winegrowers and vintners have been around for decades (Napa's Brown Estate started growing grapes in 1980, officially launching its own Brown label in 1996), but they are still woefully underrepresented. When the Black Lives Matter movement gained traction last year, it spotlighted racial inequalities among industries across the board — the wine industry being no exception. While many initiatives were already in the works, pointing to on the powerful change they could bring to the industry's existing structure, several key players have since responded by joining forces to develop and award scholarships, provide mentorship opportunities and partner on tangible education programs for underrepresented minorities.

Melanie Wilkerson, the executive sous chef at Folktable in Sonoma (www.folktable.com), was the recipient of one such award. Wilkerson, who grew up watching her grandfather make wine in North Carolina, says a lack of interest among peers at culinary school prevented her from pursuing things further when it came to learning more about wine.

"I had a great teacher, but didn't have access to information the way other people would. It wasn't until last year that I happened to catch a post on Instagram, and I was like, this is it, this is where I can formalize this kind of education." Wilkerson's real aha moment came when she received a Welcome Award from from DLynn Proctor's Napa-based nonprofit, Wine Unify (www.wineunify.org). A notable industry figure and director of Fantesca Estate & Winery (www.fantesca.com), Proctor cofounded the platform to champion diversity and help foster change by breaking down a common barrier to entry into the world of wine: education.

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—D Lynn Proctor, director at Fantesca Estate & Winery

While the organization officially launched last June, Proctor reveals that the idea had been in the works since 2017. "As a Black man who has been in this business for more than 20 years, I understand that it isn't easy. We always saw and felt minorities were being misrepresented or not given the same opportunities. We wanted to welcome those individuals who have maybe been bussing tables or working as a line cook and give them this hope and this inspiration that they could pursue a professional career in the wine, beverage or hospitality industry."

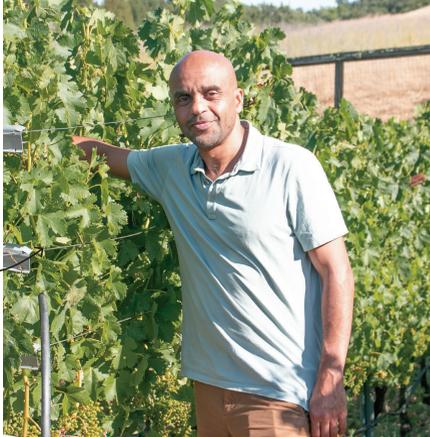
Thanks to Proctor and his team, the inaugural Welcome Award sponsored 20 recipients (including Wilkerson) to take the Level 1 Award in Wine through the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET, www.wsetglobal.com) class, among other benefits, last year. "Wine Unify paid for the four-week course, offered mentorships and outreach opportunities; basically any support that was needed they took care of it for us," Wilkerson says. "It's been fantastic. I cannot say enough about what they have put together. Everyone's just excited we finally have the opportunity to access the resources that everyone else does."

Creating a more diverse industry has always been important, but according to Phil Long, president of the African American Association of Vintners (AAAV, www.aaavintners.org) and owner of Longevity Wines (www.longevitywines.com), what's crucial is informing the next generation they can have a career in wine. "One thing we're talking about right now is how to start the education process at an

earlier age," he says, adding neither he nor anyone at partner Constellation Brands knew in high school or even college that the wine industry could offer a potential career path. To champion this goal, AAAV is focused on long-term partnerships, working closely with the United Negro College Fund (www.uncf.org) to assist with scholarships at the Sonoma State School of Business and Economics and for Certified Specialists of Wine students at the Napa Valley Wine Academy.

Another important AAAV collaboration has been with Urban Connoisseurs on the Black Winemakers Scholarship Fund (www.urbanconnoisseurs.com). Founded in 2012 by Marcia Jones, Urban Connoisseurs is a Seattle-based wine consultancy firm whose mission is to increase the number of American winemakers of African descent in the U.S. and create opportunities for the next generation to pursue careers in the industry. "We started talking to AAAV in 2019 and right when we were about to launch last March, Covid hit," says Jones of the scholarship. "The two recipients that we're announcing in March will each receive \$5,000. The next round will open in the fall and run annually from there on out. I consider this such a blessing and hopefully, as the fund grows, we can allocate more [funds] in the future." While the fund serves to provide financial assistance to African American students pursuing careers in the wine industry, it also aims to bring awareness to present-day Black winemakers and producers.

That's something V. Sheree Williams, owner and editor-in-chief of *Cuisine Noir* magazine ([**Ayele Solomon**
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V. Sheree Williams (top left), James Knox (top right)

noirmag.com), says is timely. After taking over the publication and reframing its focus to preserve and share stories of people of African descent across food, drink and travel, Williams put together the first list of Black-owned wineries in 2010. "Back then, there were around 40; today it's well over 100," she says. "Black winemakers and Black-owned wineries have been around for years — like Mac McDonald's Vision Cellars and Maison Noir by André Hueston Mack — so, it's not new, but conversations around it are, thankfully, becoming more prominent."

Williams is excited to see more effort toward diversity and notes that while celebrity endorsements, like John Legend's LVE Collection (www.lvewines.com), help raise awareness, she would still like to see more conversations between BIPOC and white producers. "It's timely to see organizations making sure diversity is front and center. All of the scholarships that have been launched are great, and I'm excited to see this young generation coming up, but I would love to see more Black-owned wines in supermarkets and wine shops."

While the wine industry works toward building a more diverse future and welcoming people of color, Wilkerson believes opening doors, having discussions and fostering education are the most significant steps in moving forward. "All of this is still pretty new, but I think the industry is heading in the right direction. Where I come from, education is something to be passed on to help the community. A big part of being a chef and being in the wine industry for me is about being able to give back myself someday, too." 🍷

V. Sheree Williams
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