

The Meaning of Mentorship

In 1995, I was a newly appointed wine buyer in Southern California, and I could count on one hand the number of women or people of color in leadership roles in the beverage-alcohol industry. At that time, there weren't any mentorship programs, so I fumbled my way through my career before finding my footing. I clearly could have benefited from some targeted guidance with respect to my professional development.

While the landscape looks better today, there's still room for improvement. I've had the opportunity to mentor a number of folks throughout my career, and I've witnessed those relationships not only result in professional advancement and improved skill sets but, in some cases, develop into enduring friendships.

Wine Unify, Bâtonnage, Roots Fund, Black Wine Professionals, and Lift Collective are just a few organizations that are focused on enacting a broad



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNETTE ALVAREZ-PETERS

Mentors and mentees at a Wine Unify event at JCB Lounge in Yountville, CA: Maryam Ahmed, Lindsay Perry, author Annette Alvarez-Peters, Mary-Margaret McCamic, Raul Toscano, and Tonya Pitts.

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Alicia Towns Franken, executive director of Wine Unify

range of development efforts within the wine industry. Alicia Towns Franken, executive director of Wine Unify, a nonprofit engaged in various education- and diversity-focused initiatives, believes that “mentorship plays a vital role in cultivating the next generation of skilled wine professionals, fostering industry growth and ensuring the preservation and progress of the wine industry as a whole,” in her words.

Of course, mentorship is built on trust and mutual respect. Relationship-building relies on creating safe and confidential spaces where mentees feel comfortable sharing their challenges and aspirations. The right mentor can help identify strengths and interests

that can illuminate potential career paths and establish goals that are vital to success. Greater confidence and competency can be achieved when the learning curve can be accelerated through solid guidance.

Michelle Schromm, executive director for Bâtonnage, a nonprofit focused on the advancement of women in wine, says, “It really is thrilling to see the benefits both mentors and mentees gain through our program. As a mentor myself, [I find it] so inspiring to see newcomers in the industry [who are] talented, passionate individuals hungry to see where they can go in their careers. Another great benefit are the mentee interactions and the

ability to hear the stories from other women in their same stage of career, which is another layer of support and motivation.”

It is important for the wine industry to continually provide platforms and events that connect individuals in the most diverse environment possible. These programs can offer substantive opportunities to help establish networks, gain career insight, and develop business and leadership skills.

Equipped with the knowledge of how difficult the wine industry can be to navigate alone, I'm a huge supporter of paying it forward. Mentorship is a powerful catalyst for personal and professional growth, and beyond having a positive impact on others, it's also personally fulfilling.

If you are attending SomCon in San Diego September 10–12, I invite you to join me and fellow Bâtonnage board member Katie Canfield for a mentorship conversation. For more information, visit sommconusa.com/conference. 