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THE WINE MAGAZINE

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The Women in Wine Network

The international Women in Wine Expo brings women from around the world together to collaborate and exchange experiences.

Ruma Singh attended the Expo in London this year

Last year, just as the pandemic was waning, I received an invitation to attend the Women in Wine Expo. The all-women's wine conference was to be held in Georgia – a country long on my bucket list. The visit did not eventually materialize owing to visa issues, so this year when I was invited to the UK edition, I was determined to participate.

What exactly is the Women in Wine Expo? It is a global network that builds a community of women entrepreneurs in the wine sector that comes together in annual conferences, usually held over two to three days in different winemaking countries of the world. In other words, “a boot camp of diversity, discovery, networking, education, fun, sisterhood, business and philanthropy”. The common factor is that the

participants are all women from the wine industry from around the world.

The idea of bringing together women entrepreneurs in wine germinated with Turkish-origin journalist and founder, Senay Ozdemir 12 years ago, while she was driving from Austin to Houston Texas looking for hard-to-locate Turkish wine for a dinner party. The idea that Turkish wine was so little represented anywhere set her thinking: here was a country with a history of 7000 years of winemaking with barely any awareness or representation in international wine markets. Shortly thereafter, Senay moved to the Netherlands and started importing top-end Turkish wines into European markets and organizing wine tastings for business events in the Benelux region.

“I soon discovered that Turkey had many women

in the wine industry who needed to have their voices heard,” she said. She also realized this was not unique. There were thousands of similar stories waiting to be told by women around the world. There was clearly an entrepreneurial gender gap in the wine industry. “As a creative person, a concept developer, this was an interesting story to tell,” she said.

Senay organised the first expo in 2019 in Rotterdam and Brussels which saw 36 women in attendance. The next edition, after a Covid-enforced break, was held in 2022 in Georgia – the cradle of wine – attended by 75 women from 20 countries. The three-day programme included masterclasses on Georgian wine and qvevri-making workshops with plenty of sightseeing, tours, and traditional food in the mix.

After Georgia, where next? “With a tagline that says, ‘Connecting women in wine from East to West,’ it made sense to go back west,” explained Senay.

London was an easy choice. One of the world's most mature wine markets, London held great interest at multiple levels as a knowledge centre for marketing, distribution and wine education.

The Wine and Spirits Education Trust and The Institute of Masters of Wine are both headquartered in London. The burgeoning interest in English sparkling wine and wine tourism along with the proximity of major winemaking regions, Kent and Sussex were a draw. “Also, the location must add value for the attendees and England was an emerging wine country,” said Senay. Ninety-one women from 26 countries registered for the May event, many of them repeat attendees.

The three-day event began with a high-energy party at a classic English pub in Smithfield before moving to the Balfour Winery in Kent the next day for day-long immersive sessions on English sparkling wine

Women in wine from around the world, who attended the Expo in London, pictured at Balfour Winery in Kent





Women in Wine Expo participants enjoy a wine-paired four-course lunch at Balfour Winery

and the rapidly-growing industry. Day Three saw a day of presentations from women from different countries speaking on topics ranging from regional wine organisations and how they work to the impact of war and politics on the wine industry. I moderated a session on India, a market which always generates much curiosity and fascination. Many in the audience came up after the event and confessed they had heard little about India and its wine markets so it was good to get the word out.

The conference wound up with a wide-ranging tasting session of different international wines (Mexico, Georgia, Portugal, Sweden, English sparkling and more) at the historic Dicken's Inn near the Tower Bridge.

Over the three days of the expo, I connected with many women, from Portuguese cork manufacturers to winemakers in New Zealand. The opportunity to bond and understand one another's journeys, make business and personal connections, and learn from each other is typically something that's not easy to come by. The wine world continues to be male-

The event began with a high-energy party at a classic English pub in Smithfield before moving to the Balfour Winery in Kent for immersive sessions on sparkling wine

dominated. Even while women increasingly find their place in every part of it, from viticulture and winemaking to marketing and journalism, genuine support often remains elusive. Women-focused networks bring women together who might otherwise never meet in a safe environment of equals.

The number of international business collaborations that have sprung from these interactions is a testament to this. Senay recounts some stories. After they met at the expo, sommelier Malgorzata Kielak, originally from Poland and Nika Shevela, founder of wine consultancy firm Wine Alphabet, originally from Russia, discovered that they both had wine in common and started working together in Berlin where both are based. Today, they continue to collaborate on regular wine events.

Another bond was formed between top sommeliers Maryna Revkova from Kiev, Ukraine and Nadezhda from Moscow, Russia. "They had been following each other on Instagram and finally met at the expo in Georgia in 2022. They became like sisters, constantly together, so unique and symbolic, in



From left to right: Sumi Sarma, Ruma Singh, Senay Ozdemir, founder Women in Wine Expo, Ritu Singhal and Vidya Narasimhan.

Knight, whose parents had moved to the UK. Their instant connection proved to be one forged many years in the past as they discovered. They had once lived in the same town and on same street in Croatia and had played together as children! Today, through their individual careers in the New Zealand and English wine industry, they have reconnected again – an amazing story where wine is the protagonist.

I was amazed at the dynamics in London," confessed Senay, "It helped that there was so much happening at this time in London, including the coronation of King Charles to the London Wine Fair. There was so much positive energy." Following the conference, the women continued with their connections, business and personal, at London's many wine bars and restaurants, some attending wine fairs and business meetings together. Lifelong bonds were formed. Senay agreed, "They have stayed connected with each other and in touch, sharing rooms when traveling or attending festivals together. It has been wonderful to connect these women, and see them grow and diversify professionally."

Of course, international events such as these can only succeed with an efficient team behind them and Senay works with country-specific teams. For London, co-organiser Nadia Zammal, and Nelly Ward DipWSET set up venues and handled logistics including organising a vintage red London bus for the group's Kent sojourn. It was a frenetic few days, but in the end, the outcome made it all worthwhile.

As the plans for next year's expo begin, there is a buzz of excitement and anticipation among the participants. Will it be in Portugal? Canada? South Africa? Wherever it is, more bonds will be forged and more business connections made, with new regions discovered and understood.

As Malgorzata said, "I really believe in women power. Together we are stronger." ❖



A tasting of wines made by women from around the world at Balfour St Barts, London

the background of the Russian-Ukrainian war," said Senay.

Another participant, Eva Pemper owner of Marlborough's award-winning Eva Pemper Wines has lived in New Zealand for the past 11 years after leaving her hometown in Croatia. She encountered fellow Croatian, Michelle