

# What Does a Wine Consultant Do (And How Can You Become One)?

BY [KELSEY OGLETREE](#)



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The vague job title of “consultant” often begs the question: What does this person actually *do*? As in other industries, wine consultants can work in a vast array of different capacities, from production to service or [retail](#). Regardless of their personal niche, they generally provide professional advice or service to various players in the wine industry.

If your vision of a wine consultant is someone who sits around and [sips](#) wine all day, you may be partially correct. But it’s not all glamor and takes much more skill and experience than just an appreciation for good Pinot. Here’s what to know if you’re thinking of becoming one.

## What Is a Wine Consultant?

While the role of a wine consultant is largely shaped by the individual and may include different areas of specialization, most tend to fall into one (or more) of four categories within the industry: restaurants, private collectors, vineyards and wineries.



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### Restaurant Wine Consultants

Wine consultants in this space advise bars and restaurants on everything from designing and diversifying wine programs to hiring sommeliers and wine directors. They may also help with operations and creating sales programs for restaurant and hotel clients.

After he worked as a sommelier in restaurants for years, New York-based Jeff Porter left his role in 2019 to pursue a career as an independent consultant.

“[Creating] the wine list is the sexy part—the human parts are always the hardest,” says Porter. Some weeks, he’s dressed to the nines helping set up a wine program at a luxury hotel in Piedmont, Italy, while others he’s sweating through a T-shirt unpacking 150 cases of wine at Barclays Center, a sport and entertainment complex in Brooklyn, New York.

### Private Collector Wine Consultants

This type of wine consultant helps private collectors build and manage their wine collections and procure rare vintages. They often travel to wine regions throughout the world, with or without the collector, to handle sourcing and logistics for their collection.

Thatcher Baker-Briggs in San Francisco launched his wine consulting business in 2019 after 16 years working in restaurants. Today, his global clientele ranges from professional athletes to venture capitalists. He's constantly on the move, often traveling three weeks out of the month. A day's work may be spent in transit, or with clients on their private planes or yachts, wine tasting from 9am until well past midnight.

“It's incredible, but you need to remain in control and also [remember] that there's a whole business that still needs to be run,” says Baker-Briggs.



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## Vineyard Consultants

Wine consultants for vineyards focus on the grape growing process from an agricultural perspective. This often means being familiar with the fruit down to a molecular level, with a goal of maximizing a terroir's presence in the wine's flavor profile. This kind of consultant may also work with individuals planting a new vineyard.

California-based Prudy Foxx earned her degree in environmental science before working as a vineyard manager, then as a researcher, biologist and practicing viticulturist. These experiences paved the way for her to found Foxx Viticulture 25

years ago.

“I make wine looking at the chemistry and what it is that brings wine to its full potential,” she says. Foxx uses the winter months to attend seminars, tasting panels and wine education classes. The rest of the year is spent visiting vineyards and talking with growers about how to improve their processes.

### Winery Consultants

This type of wine consultant may be involved in the day-to-day operations in the vineyards and at production facilities. They can oversee vineyard relationships, monitoring and taking samples from vines to inform picking and fermentation decisions, and supervising a vintage's production up through bottling.

Marketing responsibilities are also frequently involved. This can include meeting with media outlets for wine tastings and reviews, hosting release parties or planning events.

Sonoma, California-based Katy Wilson of LaRue Wines earned a degree in viticulture and agricultural business, and made her own wine before branching out to consulting in 2012. She focuses on small, family-owned wineries who hire her for her hands-on winemaking approach, as well as her business and accounting knowledge.

“During harvest, I do not take a day off for about three months,” says Wilson. “I believe that you have one chance each year to get it right and I do not want to be away from my wines during fermentation.”



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## How to Break into Wine Consulting

Paths to the many different roles in wine consulting are varied, but here's what experts say make a good foundation.

**Walk vineyards.** Good wine starts in the vineyard. To really know what good wine is, Foxx says it means knowing the vines. If you want to become a wine consultant, you need to be able to appreciate the entire process from vine to glass.

"Go in and taste the fresh grapes even before they're ripe," she says. It will help you connect viticulture to wine.

**Taste a lot of wine.** Perhaps the most fun part of the job, Baker-Briggs stresses that the only way to truly understand the countless wine regions, vintages and producers of the world is to always be tasting. "You need to put yourself in positions where you can learn to taste, to the point where [you're not] consulting based on what books say, but based on your own experience," he says.

Though you can further your knowledge by frequenting events, winery tastings or building a personal collection, often the best way to amass broad wine experience is to work in high-end restaurants or wine retail shops.

**Get (a lot of) restaurant experience.** You can't become a wine consultant overnight. Restaurants are where many of the best consultants start out, earning years of practical experience in buying, tasting and serving a large variety of wines in a professional context.

You don't have to work your way up to a wine director title, but the more years you have under your belt, the easier the transition to independent wine consultant will be. "[More experience] will allow you to be great at service and talking to people when you're under pressure about understanding variation in bottles," says Baker-Briggs.

**Take a few wine courses.** A sommelier certification can be nice to have, though it's not a requirement. Fox says it's beneficial to take wine sensory classes, such as those offered at UC Davis or the [Wine & Spirit Education Trust \(WSET\)](#), that teach you how to identify tasting notes in wines.

"You have to know what's wrong with wine to be able to tell what's right," says Foxx. Once you've honed this skill, get involved in tasting panels to put your palate to work while meeting more people in the wine industry.



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**Develop strong networking skills.** While it's possible to make a living consulting for a few large clients, you never know when one might say, "my wine cellar's full, I don't need you anymore," says Baker-Briggs. You need to constantly develop a network of new client leads to grow your business and have stability as a freelance consultant.

**Have some foundational business knowledge.** You don't need an MBA to start wine consulting, but it's helpful to seek out information on running a business, whether that's through online training, research or college courses.

Develop a basic business plan before negotiating with potential clients. Make sure this includes an outline for how and what you're going to charge. Porter says he prefers working on a project rate rather than hourly, and to base rates on your experience and the value you can show you'll provide to a client.

**Establish a personal brand.** Working as a wine consultant gives you the freedom to put your hard-earned wine knowledge to work by being of service to others while building a sustainable business out of a personal passion. Even if your wine knowledge is supreme, though, you can't skip basics like creating a website that clearly explains what you do, what you expect to offer clients, and a professional email address.

"Those little details are the things that take it to the next level, and they're important if you're going to grow your business," says Baker-Briggs.

You'll need a healthy drive to succeed, too. "There is no one telling you where to be or what to do," says Wilson. "If you are not a self-motivator, then it is very hard to be a wine consultant."

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# ‘We Are All Part of the Same Cycle’: Winemakers Embrace Agroforestry Amid Climate Change

BY JILL BARTH



DUCKS AT CLOS DES QUARTERONS, LOIRE VALLEY, FRANCE / PHOTO COURTESY XAVIER AMIRAULT

Many vineyards are monocultures, or plots devoted to one crop, and, as such, they face extreme weather conditions and climate change with a limited set of biodiverse levers to pull. Agroforestry, the cultivation and preservation of trees and their ecosystems, presents a range of solutions to these types of viticultural issues, maintaining vineyard production while reducing negative impact on the environment.

Here's how wineries around the world have embraced agroforestry for the betterment of their surroundings and their products.

**Amirault Vignerons, Saint-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil, France**





HARVEST IN SAINT-NICOLAS-DE-BOURGUEIL, FRANCE / PHOTO COURTESY OF XAVIER AMIRAULT

Sixth-generation vignerons Xavier and Agnès Amirault oversee the organic and biodynamic Clos des Quarterons vineyard in France's Loire Valley. Their work is comprised of “thousands of actions” that promote biodiversity, says Xavier Amirault. “We are caretakers!”

On their vineyard, geese and hens eat grass and weeds (often pecking them out by the roots), gobble pests and fertilize soil.

“We are in the process of extending this to the entire estate,” says Amirault. “We want to be able to let them do everything, including laying their eggs right in the vineyard—but we must manage and share the space with the foxes and weasels.”

Sharing the space with organisms that call the area home is exactly what agroforestry seeks to achieve. Amirault points out the need to plant trees not just for wood and fruit, but to provide habitat and shade for birds and insects, and organic matter from fallen leaves. “A lot of people talk about it, but around the world few plant trees,” he says.

The agroforestry philosophy restores tree populations throughout the countryside where agriculture is present. “It is crazy to think that ‘monoculture’ could work in the long run to feed people with healthy food without destroying the balance of nature,” says Amirault. “Let’s bring back more wilderness!”

## Viña Tarapacá, Isla de Maipo, Chile



SEBASTIÁN RUIZ AT VINA TARAPACA, ISLA DE MAIPO, CHILE / PHOTO COURTESY VIÑA TARAPACA

Viña Tarapacá is in a biodiversity hotspot in Central Chile that is threatened by development. Winemaker Sebastián Ruiz and his team are convinced that restoring and conserving biodiversity has a positive effect on climate change.

In early 2014, the estate carried out an in-depth soil and climate study, which revealed that the land was highly compacted, and that the property supported many exotic species that absorbed a high amount of precious moisture. The result was a biodiversity master plan.

“We knew that as we restored the biodiversity of our estate, we would also recover the life in our soils, while also enhancing the meso- and microclimatic conditions,” says Ruiz.

The property’s position between the Altos de Cantillana conservation area and the biological corridor of the Maipo River could potentially interrupt the natural traffic of wildlife. “In order to reactivate connectivity, we created a series of biological corridors between both,” says Ruiz. This was done by replacing exotic plants with native species.

Ruiz says the vineyards are now better balanced, resulting in expressive, character-driven wines.

“This is a win-win for both production of wine and our planet,” he says. “It’s time to understand that we are all part of the same cycle.”

# Di Filippo Wines, Cannara, Italy



DONKEY AT DI FILLIPPO WINES, CANNARA, ITALY / PHOTO COURTESY DI FILIPPO WINES

The Di Filippo family farms organic and biodynamic vineyards in the heart of Umbria, Italy. The small team led by Emma Di Filippo is engaged in an agroforestry project with University of Perugia, where geese roam freely in the vineyard and feed on the vegetation that grows spontaneously, rather than using chemical and mechanical means of vineyard management.

This has delivered a perhaps unexpected side impact.

“A test carried out by both Perugia and Sassari universities has demonstrated that geese in a vineyard help to reduce the level of copper in the soil just by grazing,” says Leonardo Besi, export manager for Di Filippo Wines. In an organic vineyard, copper is permitted as a fungicide and, while this treatment is a lifesaver against mildew, there is concern that it can build up in the soil and harm the microbiome.

“This is a win-win for both production of wine and our planet. It’s time to understand that we are all part of the same cycle.” —

*Sebastián Ruiz*

How does this impact the geese? The team from the University of Perugia studied that, too. “It’s interesting to note that they haven’t really found any difference in the level of [copper] in the meat [of the] geese in the vineyard and the geese from conventional farming,” says Besi.

The Di Filippo family is counting the benefits of having their feathered friends around.

“Just this year we conducted tests of the microbiome in all our different vineyards, and we found that in the agroforestry one there is a higher level of beneficial microorganisms,” says Besi, noting that fruit from this vineyard is selected for the estate’s top-quality wines.

## Graham Beck, Robertson, South Africa



GRAHAM BECK VINEYARD, SOUTH AFRICA / PHOTO COURTESY GRAHAM BECK

Since the designation originated in 2004, sparkling wine producer [Graham Beck](#) has earned [Conservation Champion Status from the World Wildlife Fund \(WWF\)](#). The winery team is committed to conserving at least four acres of natural vegetation for every one acre farmed, in a region that is also a biodiversity hotspot.

“We also initiated a voluntary agreement with 27 of our neighbors by creating the [Rooiberg-Breederiver Conservancy](#), and, as a group of farmers, we now conserve more than 35,000 acres of natural vegetation,” says Mossie Basson, conservation manager for

Graham Beck. This effort, in cooperation with WWF, establishes a dedicated rehabilitation manager for this corridor of the endangered Succulent Karoo biome, which Basson says is the most vulnerable part of the “glorious” Cape Floral Kingdom.

Basson believes that the Earth and its human inhabitants can't survive on agricultural land only. “We prefer to talk about ‘area wide planning,’ which we have practiced in the Conservancy,” he says. In his eyes, establishing protected and rehabilitated land ensures sustainability alongside development.

“We at Graham Beck conduct our business within this vulnerable ecosystem,” says Basson. “Just as important as our quality of product and well-being of the people that work for us, is the well-being of this ecosystem.”



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