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The traveler's food, wine and drink guide

SAN FRANCISCO + THE BAY AREA + WINE COUNTRY

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SAN FRANCISCO'S
INNOVATIVE CHEFS

WINE

CELEBRATING
WOMEN OF COLOR

PLAY

TOP-10
HAPPY HOURS



AKIKO FREEMAN

To say Akiko Freeman's family goes way back in Japan would be an understatement. Her family members trace their lineage back 23 generations. She is a cousin of Japan's Empress Michiko and related to the founding Mitsubishi family. She also likely the only female Asian winemaker in the entire United States. Akiko makes the juice at Freeman Winery in Sebastopol and co-owns the winery with her husband, Ken. In her job, she performs tasks that no women in her family have done before. "In Japan, ladies don't usually pick up anything heavier than chopsticks," she quips. "Now I'm doing punch-downs and carrying boxes of wine around the winery." Freeman credits her father and grandfather for her interest in wine; her grandfather loved Bordeaux-style vino and her father liked wines from Burgundy. When asked to describe her style, Akiko says proudly that she tries to imbue her wines with classic Old World-style influences. Consider it her way of paying tribute to the past.

CELEBRATING WOMEN OF COLOR IN WINE

Five Trailblazing Women to Watch

By Matt Villano



THE CALIFORNIA WINE industry isn't known for its diversity—for decades, most winemakers have had similar backgrounds, and most have been men. In recent years, however, a handful of women of color have taken Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino counties by storm, blazing new trails for their respective families and for the industry overall. Here are the stories of five remarkable women in the wine industry.

AMELIA MORAN CEJA

Amelia Ceja is one of the most recognizable faces in Wine Country. In 1999 she was the first Mexican-American woman to be president of a winery—an operation that bears her family name. In 2005 the California Legislature named her “woman of the year” for her accomplishments in making Ceja a renowned brand. But her fame extends beyond wine into cooking as well; she has demonstrated the art of making tortillas at the Smithsonian Institute, and over the last 10 years has filmed more

than 100 video blogs outlining recipes for other iconic Mexican dishes. The story of Amelia Ceja's rise to prominence is the true American Dream. She and her family arrived in Napa from Jalisco, Mexico when she was 12. She subsequently learned English and worked her way up the ranks from vineyard worker to vineyard owner. “We are a pioneering family,” she says. “My grandmother told me, ‘Whatever you do, if you love it and learn everything you can about it, you will be successful—and not dependent on a man.’”



THE TASTE OF SUCCESS

(Opposite) Ripe grapes hang from vines. (From top) Ceja Vineyards currently offers 10 types of red wine. Amelia Ceja enjoys success as one of the most prominent women in wine.

(OPPOSITE) ©BLUE PLANET STUDIO / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM. (THIS PAGE, FROM TOP) ©NEW AFRICA / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; ©COURTESY CEJA VINEYARDS.



REDS RULE

Brown Estates currently offers four varieties of zinfandel, as well as cabernet sauvignon and charbono.

C. DENEEN BROWN

Technically speaking, C. Deneen Brown is one of three siblings who run the show at Brown Estate; she serves as president while her sister Coral is director of brand management and their brother David is the winemaker. But as far as the public is concerned, Deneen is the face of the company. This visibility is important because the family represents the first and only Black-owned estate winery in the Napa Valley. "Being Black has had a huge impact in terms of our customer base," she says, noting that her parents bought the property in Chiles Valley in 1980 and founded the winery in 1995. "Not only has it inspired more people of color to come and try our wines, but it also has inspired people of color to think about getting into the wine business. When they see people who look like them, they think, 'Hey, maybe I can do that, too.'" In addition to a hospitality operation at the family estate, the Browns opened a tasting room in downtown Napa in 2017.

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VANESSA ROBLEDO

Hailing from a Mexican clan of nine kids, Vanessa Robledo has been working in the vineyards with her family for as long as she can remember. "When I was growing up, it was very traditional. My sister and I couldn't leave the house without being escorted by one of our seven brothers," she remembers. "I knew I didn't want that life. I wanted to run the business." Eventually, Vanessa did just that, rising from a regular gig as her father's translator to become president of Sonoma's Robledo Family Winery and taking the operation from 100 cases to 20,000 cases in 10 years. These days, after stints as co-owner at Black Coyote Winery and CEO of Mi Sueno Winery in Napa, Vanessa runs her own wine consulting firm, V.R. Wine Business Consulting, which specializes in direct-to-consumer sales, multicultural marketing, and marketing to specific demographics, lessons she learned during her days helping Dad. Vanessa likes to think she pays homage to her family heritage with every sale.

(FROM TOP) COURTESY FREEMAN VINEYARDS; COURTESY THEODORA LEE; COURTESY VANESSA ROBLEDO.

THEODORA LEE

Wine has been a side career for Texas-born Theodora Lee, but it still gets her undivided attention. When she's not working on high-powered cases in her job as shareholder at Littler Mendelson, she's likely at her Yorkville Highlands ranch, dubbed Theopolis Vineyards. (In case you're wondering, the name was Lee's line name when she pledged Delta Sigma Theta sorority at Spelman College.) Farming certainly has run in Lee's family. Her grandfather was a sharecropper; her father was an educator and farmer. She herself learned to drive on tractor at age of 8, and still tills soil and rides the vineyard whenever possible. "Being a grape farmer is a tribute to my family and I honor them every day by being the best vintner I can be," she says. Lee adds that she is incredibly proud to be a female black business owner in an industry that doesn't have much diversity. "It is important to be the best, and by having people with diverse backgrounds at the table, your products and service will reflect that excellence."

GENERATIONS OF WINE-GROWING

(From top) Akiko Freeman stands next to her vines. Theodora Lee rides a tractor through her vineyards. Vanessa and Maria Robledo hold grapes from the Robledo Winery.