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ensive server education program in the city, weekly wine classes enable a Striped Bass restaurant to offer a wine class every Saturday.

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Taste



PARIS L. GRAY/Courier Post

Intoxicating

Marnie Old, sommelier at Striped Bass, brings youthful vision to a field with a stuffy reputation.

By BETH D'ADDONNO
For the Courier-Post

Not too many people can say a wine has "impertinent hints of green apple, along with a lively hint of violets on the nose" and be taken seriously. Marnie Old can. Old is the sommelier at Striped Bass, keeper of the wine lists, sage of both vintages and vintners. At 29, she's young for the job — and the fact she is a she, well, that is al-



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Marnie Old, sommelier at Striped Bass in Philadelphia, pours a glass of wine at the bar.

"That was the first opportunity I had to taste wine side by side, to compare five Merlots or Sauvignon Blancs," Old says. "The class was a really eye opening. My palate was blown. I hadn't realized the complexity, the layers, no two wines are the

same. I'd found my niche. I combine so many of the things, including geography and history. I can learn more by reading than by reading. It's a fascinating mix of art and science — I

wasn't taking college classes, concentrating on food and beverage books. I'm working myself to get a month, on never heard of every was posi-

tioned one of the titles of Congratulate in the and went to believe the value of this of florally tasted along ed me to be. is the t res- focus chnie will instruct. This is the first time outside of Manhattan.

"It's busy, but I love it," Old says of her current hair-raising schedule. Yet, to see Old at Striped Bass, with nary a hair out of place, is to feel her calm presence as one attempts to navigate a sea of wine.

Her joy at pairing an entree of grilled pumpkin swordfish paillard with broccoli raab with a mellow class of Foppiano 1993 Zinfandel

from Dry Creek Valley is exceeded only by the appreciation of a satisfied customer, happy to discover it isn't the only choice for fish. Old sees the most important as-

pect of her job as sommelier is to her customers happy. try to empower my customers, e the starch out of drinking says Old.

with what she calls the "widows and orphans," single leftover bottles which have been taken off the wine list because they are no longer available or stock is diminished.

The training program has become an all-consuming project. Every Saturday she offers a 90-minute wine class that anyone who works at Striped Bass, or Rouge, Stein's other restaurant, is welcome to attend.

"I learned from Kevin (Zralely) that tasting wine shouldn't be formal. You have to get people talking, or you're nowhere." She came up with a tasting sheet that helps staff members to classify and remember aspects of each wine.

The only down side of the project is it has taken time Old would rather her MW, Master of Wine, or MS, Master Sommelier certificate, which she intends to get.

Instead of pursuing her own education, this fall she'll be helping

other wine lovers pursue theirs. As a member of the American Sommelier Association, Old is working with fellow board member Andrea Immer, beverage director of Windows on the World, to organize the second session of a two-level wine education program. An eight-week advanced certificate course will be offered for professional as well as budding oenophiles. Old, along with Bob Trimble of Seagram Charreau and Estates Wine Company, will instruct. This is the first time the two-level course is being offered outside of Manhattan.

so unusual. "I still get giggles in the restaurant," says Old, an intense, dark-eyed beauty who hails from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. "Customers are expecting a balding guy in his 60s with a bow tie and a dish around his neck. That's just not me." No kidding. Not only is Old cut from a different cloth than many of her wine steward colleagues, her approach to tasting, drinking and enjoying wine is refreshingly simple, unflinchingly direct. Not that she can't go off for 15 minutes about why a 1997 Bonterra Lakeview Vineyard Roussanne from Mendocino is an ideal introduction to the world of wine. Old's passion for the grape runs deep and she can wax poetic at the drop of a cork. But she also believes the drinking and enjoying of wine shouldn't be treated with the same reverence as visiting an Indian mystic atop a Himalayan peak. Wine is meant to be enjoyed. "I don't practice or encourage anything that makes wine less accessible," says Old. To that end, with the help and support of Striped Bass owner Neil Stein, Old has organized what may be the most compe-