

# Philadelphia Inquirer

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## Local Angle

PHYLLIS STEIN-NOVACK

### Marnie Old

She likes canoe trips in the Canadian wilderness, large mongrel dogs, comfortable shoes and a drink called the Big One, café au lait in a really big iced tea glass. Marnie Old, who turned 30 last month, is one of the youngest full-time sommeliers — or wine steward, as she prefers to be called —

in Philadelphia. She orders, tastes and cares for hundreds of bottles of wine for the cellars at Neil Stein's Striped Bass, Rouge and Fishmarket.

"Some 70-year-old patrons see me walking around Striped Bass and think I'm the hostess," says Old, who moves like a ballet dancer, drinks coffee nonstop, and speaks rapid-fire but with complete composure. "They have this long-gone image of an older man with a tin cup on a chain hanging around his neck."

Old left her native Winnipeg for Philadelphia 12 years ago. She worked as a waitress at several restaurants before landing a position at the Four Seasons Hotel.

"It was the room-service graveyard shift. Ten p.m. to 6 a.m. I later became a bartender in the Swann Lounge and met wine expert Kevin Zraly, who was teaching classes at the hotel. He asked for volunteers, and the whole wine experience hit me like a bolt from the blue."

Old thinks fine dining is akin to a theatrical experience. She arrives for work in rehearsal mode: street clothes, hiking boots, backpack. She transforms herself for the "show." "Neil calls my office 'backstage' because I have filing cabinets filled with clothes, shoes, jewelry and makeup. I get dressed up and then put on my high heels."

Although she says the restaurant business "can chew you up and spit you out," Old has been a wine steward at Striped Bass since it opened five years ago, a remarkable stretch in restaurant time. She wouldn't trade her passion for wine for another career. "I have an affinity for service," she says, "and sharing with others the wines I truly enjoy." □

PHYLLIS STEIN-NOVACK writes about restaurants for South Philadelphia Review and Where magazine.

A taste for wines serves her well.