

# Philadelphia Examiner

## June 2010

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Philadelphia Food and Drink Philadelphia Wine Examiner

### Marnie Old, part one: The wine geek who drank up Philadelphia

June 6, 9:38 PM - Philadelphia Wine Examiner - Jeff Alexander



Marnie Old / Photo by Jeff Alexander

This is the first installment of a two-part profile of Marnie Old.


She stood on the hotel ballroom floor, the fastest blur in a blurry room, a cartwheeling vision of flip charts and adjectives, pumping out enough wine knowledge to power a PECO substation. Marnie Old, Philadelphia-based sommelier, consultant and wine dynamo, was stationed at the center of the Philadelphia Wine Festival, energetically expounding on the old and new wine worlds for the benefit of any passing tippler. It was a familiar scene for anyone who had seen her similarly erudite presentations for Philly.com.

When Old delivers information, it doesn't come in delicate demi bottles. It flows in volume, by the magnum, aerobically and Methuzelah. She has a lot to say and you will get the point, dear listener, through clarity, emphasis and sheer force of intelligence.

Unambiguous about her stream of knowledge presentation, I asked the Philly-based vino virtuosa to meet me and explain how she rose to prominence in our hoagie- and lager-laden burg. We gathered at a Washington Square café near her office. Her new book, *Wine Secrets - Advice from Sommeliers, Winemakers and Connoisseurs*, was out and she was apparently energized by an opportunity to talk shop.

Old's resume is well stocked: hands-on restaurant and wine trade veteran, consultant, educator, author and reviewer for an impressive lineup of media. A native of Canada, she relocated to Philadelphia in 1987 and lived on waitressing tips for years before willing herself onto center stage of the city's budding food and wine scene. "I ended up in restaurants because I found it more interesting than what I was doing in school," she said. "Yet wine was not in the picture, nor was there exposure to it in her early life. "My dad used to drink beer," she recalled, noting there was no sea change when she landed in Philly and worked the restaurant floors of the unrefined city. "I remember disliking the wines that we served. That's because I was tasting them outside of the food context which is how most young people are introduced to wine."

"Education is the organizing principle behind what I do," Old said over her Caesar salad, explaining that her new book tackles the "big concepts" that many people miss about wine, as well as insights and tips that will help the wine-curious navigate the retail racks. She interviewed the "big names in the business" and then them to share really common sense, ballpoint advice.



Wine Secrets by Marnie Old

The book is an easy read, crammed with practical and bite-sized gems, in the words of some of wine's biggest names. There is British wine goddess *Jancis Robinson* discussing how to gauge when bottles are ready to drink, master chef *Jacques Pépin* sharing ways to use leftover wine for cooking and iconoclastic vintner *Randall Graham* waxing away on old world versus new. Old's favorite chapter, "because it's mind blowing," is about preserving wine by freezing it. "It's so much better than vacuum pumping" and it staves off oxidation and other nasties that break wine down.

How did a young woman, a wine agnostic from the Land of Molson, come to occupy such a prominent role in defining Philly's wine identity? According to Old, it was her natural predilection for education, performance and communication. "I'm naturally a geek," she insists, with a talent for retaining minutiae. The hospitality business was a natural entrée for a hard-charging newcomer, and it afforded her the opportunity to play out her talents. A variety of restaurant jobs led her to the Four Seasons Philadelphia where she enrolled in the room service graveyard shift, then swifly graduated to the floor of the heralded *Equinox Restaurant*. It proved to be a milestone moment in her career and her first exposure to a proper wine program. It also introduced her to *Kevin Zraly*, who brought his Windows of the World wine classes to the hotel where the young Old assisted and soaked the lessons up, word for word.

Zraly taught Old, who "categorically wrote off certain varietals," that wine was influenced by multiple factors -- climate, origin, winemaking techniques, etc. -- and when tasting a range of Chardonnays side by side, for example, differences ranged widely. The fledgling also modeled her presentation style after Zraly's, infusing humor, high energy and a "Sesame Street, Elmo vibe" to lessons that drove home points that mattered.

Old's next station was Chanterelles, under chef/restauranteur Philippe Chin, where the wine program was foisted upon her. It was a crucial, albeit inevitable, move toward her first management gig. At 26, she walked into the world of *Nail Stein* and an enormously challenging sommelier post at *Stepped Back*. Long and punishing hours ensued, with Old touching nearly every corner of the celebrated Walnut Street restaurant. "It was a huge opportunity to step up and learn," she recalled. The pace was unrelenting, but it opened doors to additional enterprises and afforded Old the latitude to manage a wine and liquor budget in the millions.

By the time she exited the Stein *mini-empire* she was managing beverage programs for multiple locations, including Rouge, Avenue D and others, and had become the leading fine wine purchaser in Commonwealth. "I was on the radar of every wine company and every winery that sold wine into Pennsylvania." She was also clueless about her next step.

Shot from a cannon, she had gone from 120 to zero overnight. "I was stumped," she said, and briefly considered leaving Philadelphia. She decided against it. "Why trade away the capital I had here?" She made the decision to go solo from her local base and pursue independent wine education, a la Kevin Zraly, corporate entertaining and consulting for anyone who asked. Her refrain was, "Wine, beer, spirits, you name it...I'm your girl."

Marnie Old had pulled the cork on a bumper career.

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 **Marnie Old, part two: Keep it simple, sommelier**  
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This is the second instalment of a two-part profile of Marnie Old. Part one can be seen [here](#).

Marnie Old hit a hard stop in her Philadelphia sommelier career and stared into the forest, unsure of the next step. Abruptly bounced from a high profile post in the turbulent world of restaurateur Neil Stein, Old was rattled and understandably blind to a clearing just beyond the trees.

Sprung from the constraints of her day-to-day slog, Old proved an energetic genie out of the bottle. She had room to expand, and she rapidly padded her experiences in Philadelphia and other wine circles, drawing heat with her animated enthusiasm and knowledge. The early corporate entertaining gigs fed into steady consulting and educational roles, media exposure and high praise. Her CV includes director of wine studies at the [Franch Culinary Institute](#), instructor at Temple University and New York's [Astor Center](#) and designer of beverage programs at restaurants ranging from Momomo in New York City to Philly's [Bar Ferdinand](#). Her consulting company, Old Wines LLC, claims clients like [Stephen Starr](#) and the PLCB.

Old comes back to the forest when she talks wine. It's an apt metaphor for the confusion and clutter that, in her view, was built up by an industry obsessed with [Robert Parker](#)-like ratings and stratospherically priced alpha bottles. "In our business, we've gotten into the habit of starting with the exceptions... I think of it as a forest for the trees issue. It's not that the beautiful trees aren't important. It's that until you kind of understand how big the forest is and where it starts, it's very hard to appreciate that level of detail."

In line with her longtime approach, Old aims to cut through the overgrowth with her [latest book](#). Her edict, possibly starting to some, is contrarian. "It's not about the wine," she states emphatically, adding that Americans' compulsion to fetishize wines has rendered skewed consumer perceptions. She goes further to say wine, at its best, is made to compliment food, not stand alone like a cocktail. Her way is an understanding of the basics – sweetness, acidity, body, tannins, food pairings – that provide broader context rather than subjective tasting notes that trip up consumers.

During a recent meeting in Center City, Old's surging presentation of information and opinion was impressive. Staggered by the impending task of distilling her verbal stream for print, I asked a series of quick questions to glean a few user-friendly gems. What followed wasn't simple or canned, but unquestionably rich.

**Tasting and interpreting wines is intimidating to many wine drinkers. How can you help?**  
What's relevant to the entry-level consumer is to step back and look at the big picture, which is: This wine is full bodied, this wine is dry, its acidity level is medium to medium high. It's got overt, strong oak qualities to it...The very first class I have with (anyone) almost always focuses on what I call the objective evaluation of wine...Is it low, medium or high as compared to most wines in sugar content, in acid content, in overall flavor intensity from the grapes and overall flavor intensity from the barrels, in thickness of texture which comes mostly from alcohol and in that tannic astringency...those to me are framing, basic issues...

**Should people age wine more?**  
No, I think winemakers should be aging wines more... if you want to shop for wine that's ready to drink in the red wine category, it's hard to do better than the Spain section... (People) ask me which kinds of wines do you age and which don't you age, and I usually say if you're spending less than 35 dollars on a bottle, the chances are you shouldn't worry too much about it. It should taste pretty good now.

**What's the best wine that few people try?**  
A category that is... so hard not to like, and yet gets no respect and nobody bothers buying it – or nobody spends money on a decent one – is German Riesling. The stuff is pure bottled pleasure.

**The economy has given more leverage to wine consumers. How do you feel about the current purchase power?**  
I think that if you're looking at discounted premium wines right now you're not going to see discounts like this get much better... We're pretty close to the point of diminishing returns (for wines) in that regard. What I would also say is that Pennsylvania shoppers are pretty uniquely placed...the scale on which the PLCB is purchasing, particularly within those one-time buying categories... (like) those luxury buys that are... brought in by the palate. There are some amazing deals, and just because they don't have a [Chairman's Selection](#) sticker or sign they often get overlooked. I would say all of those are tremendously interesting right now.

**What can consumers do to get more enjoyment from wine?**  
I think Europeans know something that we in the new world have been slow to embrace, which is that wine is better understood as a condiment than it is as a product by itself... This idea that you judge a wine on first taste and decide whether you like it or not... this is so artificial... Wine is so sensitive to context in terms of the way it changes with different foods... Take a sip of the wine, really notice how it tastes, then do a lick of salt. Come back to the same wine and notice how it changes dramatically. The perception of acidity is blocked almost entirely... Then, give yourself a minute or two to recover and do it again but this time do it with honey instead of salt and you'll see the exact opposite response... It helps break people of this idea that there's right and wrong... This is a beverage. It's designed to be enjoyed... It's a product that's about social occasions and about time with your friends and family.

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