

A Way With Wine

How travel and wine have inspired Tamra Weiss and her work at Coco Pazzo.

By Lindsey Reiser • Photography by Dan Merlo



For most people, traveling for work involves business casual attire, a briefcase and no passport. For Tamra Weiss, it means exploring the Italian countryside and drinking memorable wine. As the wine director at Coco Pazzo and Coco Pazzo Café, Tamra brings her experience gained from a lifetime of travel to the table.

Local roots, foreign pursuits

While traveling throughout Europe is now a big part of Tamra's life, she started out as a Midwestern girl, growing up mostly around Chicago. The dinner table and good wine were valued from an early age, with her family often citing the motto, "All is well that ends with a good meal."

Though raised in an era when Italian wine meant Chianti in straw-scabbard bottles, Tamra was exposed to atypical vintages. Her father would seek out wines from specialty Italian shops for Sunday dinner, giving Tamra an understanding of wine that went beyond the straw encased stereotype.

"On Sundays he'd pull out a really nice bottle and tell us about it," Tamra recalls. "He would let us taste it, just a tiny taste. From a very early age I knew that these were special bottles."

During college, Tamra focused on Near Eastern studies and traveled to Cairo, Egypt to study abroad. After graduation she chose to stay across the pond working in a specialized agency, this time in Geneva, Switzerland. Living in Switzerland with her was a friend and student at the esteemed hospitality school Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne, who often went on wine tasting excursions around Europe and extended these invitations to Tamra. As a civil servant for the United Nations, Tamra had ample time off and gladly tagged along on these gastronomic field trips.

"I was completely bitten by the wine bug," she says. "Seeing what wine drinking was like in the hotels and restaurants in Italy and France and visiting wineries, I thought that was amazing."

Forging a path back home

After returning to Chicago, Tamra began working for the local distributor Heritage Wine Cellars, where she was largely outnumbered as a woman. After three years working for Heritage, she started selling port wine for Symington Family Estates and again found herself as a rare female presence in the wine business. She traveled the country and spoke at port and cigar dinners, often at men's clubs, where she was frequently met with little welcome.

"The food and beverage person would say 'Oh, you're the speaker. This is a men's club, there aren't any women here,'" Tamra recounts. "And I'd say, 'Isn't that too bad. I'd be happy to go back to my hotel and order room service.'"

However, Tamra always felt appreciated by the Symingtons, and it was through her continued work with the company that she met her husband and owner of Coco Pazzo, Jack Weiss. After working together for about a year, Tamra and Jack became friends, and eventually more than friends. In 2003 they opened Pili Pili as both husband and wife and business duo, with Tamra compiling the wine list. Though

Pili Pili is no more, Tamra secured Food & Wine magazine's Best New Wine List award and two Wine Spectator Awards of Excellence in its name.

Today, the couple works together at Coco Pazzo restaurants, where Tamra designs the wine program and has won three additional Wine Spectator Awards of Excellence. The list is strictly Italian labels, allowing her to continue traveling across the Atlantic. An enological explorer, Tamra often spends her trips driving about the Tuscan countryside, sniffing out unheard-of wines and vineyards. One experience she recommends to every wine lover is to stay in a vineyard guest house that many wineries provide for travelers.

"You can wake up right next to the vineyard and go out and walk around," says Tamra. "I think it adds something and people get more interested than if they're sitting in a restaurant."

A new approach to enjoying wine

At Coco Pazzo, Tamra promotes a European attitude towards drinking wine. Since education helps break down some of the wine stereotypes Americans have, she holds tastings with employees, making sure they can answer any questions from the customer; she's also planning public tasting events this May. Tamra is particularly interested in the younger generations of wine drinkers, people in their 20s and 30s, whom she feels take a more European approach to wine.

"There's a comfort level," says Tamra. "In Europe there isn't the intimidation and the mysticism that surrounds wine. I really like the young people, their attitude and the way they mix it up and match things differently. They have a sense of the Italian wine without the baggage of 'old wine knowledge.'"

Aside from education, Tamra constantly works to enhance the wine experience at Coco Pazzo. The wine list changes frequently to accompany seasonal cooking, introduce new, obscure or underappreciated labels and reflect a good value to customers. It's important to her that guests enjoy a pizza and glass of rosé for under \$20, just as she and her friends once did as intrepid European travelers in the street cafés of Geneva. In fact, that European al fresco charm is not unlike the experience at Coco Pazzo Café, which has a more casual wine list than Coco Pazzo, perfect for dining outdoors. Tamra also designs food and wine pairings for private events, crafting the perfect blend of flavors for special occasions.

Looking back, the winding course of Tamra's career does look like something of an epic journey.

"I'm always curious about how people come to this kind of position that I have," she says, "Because there usually is no direct path, they didn't start out this way."

Wine Recommendations

These bottles top Tamra's list of must-try wines.

The Unlikely Blend Tormaresca Neprica, Puglia. This is a rather experimental wine from the renowned Antinori family, made from Negroamaro, Primitivo and Cabernet Sauvignon.

The Standard-Breaker Castello di Ama, Chianti. This wine breaks the "straw bottle" Chianti stereotype and is made in a hamlet where wine enthusiasts can rent a room and spend the night surrounded by vineyards.

The Perfect Balance Abbazia di Novacella, Kerner. From a winery in the north of Italy, Kerner is a Riesling and Gewurztraminer blend that's not too dry and not too sweet.

RL RESTAURANT



EXQUISITE AMERICAN DINING IN AN ELEGANT
ATMOSPHERE INSPIRED BY FINE CITY CLUBS.

115 EAST CHICAGO AVENUE • 312-475-1100
WWW.RLRESTAURANT.COM



THE
FRENCH PASTRY
SCHOOL
City Colleges of Chicago



Pursue your *passion* for pastry...

SPANISH FIESTA

JUNE 26-27, 2009



Celebrity Spanish Pastry Chefs Paco Torreblanca and Oriol Balaguer
Chicago Celebrity Chef Rick Bayless
Once-in-a-lifetime workshop

226 West Jackson Boulevard ♦ Chicago, IL 60606 ♦ 312.726.2419

www.frenchpastryschool.com