

Sommelier savours success: Sandi Marques has turned a passion for wine into a growing business, Cork and Karma, which tries to help enthusiasts unlock the mysteries of wine as well as their elusive 'sixth sense'

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Illustration: Colour Photo: GORDON BECK, THE GAZETTE / Sandi Marques is a 33-year-old sommelier and wine educator who started her business in Ontario two years ago.

How does one turn a passion into a thriving business? In the case of Sandi Marques, one glass of wine at a time.

The 33-year-old sommelier and wine educator started her business two years ago in Ontario - after 14 years working in restaurants and hotels. Six months later, she moved to Quebec with her husband, a sales trainer for Novartis.

It seemed the right fit for a woman whose strongest childhood memories involve crates of grapes being delivered each year to her Portuguese household in Cambridge, Ont., from which her dad made wine.

Wine tasting, it turns out, is more complex than one might imagine - it's not simply quaffing a glass or two of good red. Marques is showing me how it's done.

Sitting across the table at Cafe Ferreira, she chooses a glass of Quinta do Portal 1999 from the Douro region of Portugal. She holds the glass at a 45-degree angle.

"Look," Marques said with some intensity. "Look at the colour at the rim and the centre, the core. There's a slight hint of brown-yellow tinge at the rim, because of contact with the barrel."

Then she takes the glass by the stem - "this is how we find its legs" - and swirls it enthusiastically. Clear streams of glycerine wash down the sides, and depending on its age and quality, the streams will be thicker or thinner to denote alcohol content.

She's spot on at 14-per-cent alcohol.

"First you look, then swirl and finally you smell," she said.

This is the most important sense for the wine taster, whose abilities are so refined that Marques is able to use words like vegetal, earthy, dark plum, black pepper or coffee to describe a particular aroma in the wine.

All it takes to refine the senses is practice, Marques said. "The best way to get the vocabulary for wine is to smell things. Smell pepper, melon, canned and then fresh peaches."

"Pay attention to smell and you'll see that you can apply that to a glass of wine," Marques said.

"Most people, when they start appreciating wine, use generic words like fruity or woody," she said. "What gets you to become a better taster is the nose."

"And research suggests that women have better noses than men."

Tasting is the last step of the process.

To do this, first the sip of wine is swished all around so it makes contact with all parts of the mouth. "Like you're gargling," she said. "Then take in a little air, to help the olfactory meet the tongue."

She swallows. "Nice wine, medium bodied, good level of acidity. The wood barrels have infused into the wine, and it has a medium finish (finish being how long the flavour lingers)."

This wine, she decides, would be lovely with the tiered duck and potatoes with apple being served as a first course at her Flavours of Portugal wine tasting event next week.

This is another element of her quietly growing business, Cork and Karma - the occasional dinner with wine, in this case, a three-course gourmet meal paired with four wine tastings to be held at Cafe Ferreira.

Marques, a mother of two young children, has been well schooled in both food and wine, with a commerce degree in hospitality and tourism management from Ryerson University, a culinary diploma from George Brown College and her

sommelier's licence from the International Sommelier Guild.

She named the company, she said, after the cork trees in Portugal. "And I added the karma because I believe that the reason we're here is to give back."

Note the tag line - "awaken your sixth sense" - meaning your intuition, in this case about wine. "You're then able to see what no one else sees," she said.

And it applies to daily, even business life. "Wine," Marques said philosophically, "is a great way to build better relationships."

Everything in life, she said, relates to food and wine: you sit at the table, with conversation, good feelings. "Everything transpires back to the table."

Her job as a wine educator is to teach people about the wines, yes, but also to teach them to get out more, enjoy life, be social, she theorized.

And what about professionals who need to learn proper wine etiquette for business dealings. "I teach how to order, how to taste wine ... and then they socialize. It's like team-building."

Her dreams of wine are bigger than the business that now includes a 200-member wine club, wine tastings and seminars and a wine-cellar subscription service that offers would-be collectors advice on stocking their cellars. She is in the growing stage of her business, pouring all her revenue back into the company.

"Growing a business takes time," Marques said.

Her goals, which she said will take about three years to reach, include a TV show on wine that she plans to pitch to the Food Network, and her first book, a primer that will focus on wine and awakening that elusive "sixth sense."

"I want people, when they think of wine, to think of me," she said. "I want to be the foremost authority in Quebec."

Her favourite wine? Marques laughed. "That depends on who I'm with, what we're eating, and the mood I'm in."

For information about the True Flavours of Portugal wine tasting and meal, and about Cork and Karma, log on to www.corkandkarma.com

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