



Industry veterans share career lessons learned

Skills learned on the floor can be translated to many other jobs

[David Flaherty](#) | Nov 17, 2017



David Flaherty has more than 20 years of experience in the hospitality industry. He is a certified cicerone and a former operations manager and beer and spirits director for Hearth restaurant and the Terroir wine bars in New York City. He is currently marketing director for the Washington State Wine Commission and writes about wine, beer and spirits in his blog, [Grapes and Grains](#).

I once heard a wine director say to a group of hospitality students, “The restaurant industry is basically an island of misfits.”

In many ways, he is correct. Restaurants draw people from all industry sectors. It’s not uncommon for one to work alongside a poet, a Broadway dancer or even an ex-con. The hospitality industry employs people from all walks of life, many just looking to make a paycheck. But I’ve also worked with some of the most driven and talented professionals I’ve ever known, whom I’d call anything but misfits.

As we all know, it’s a challenging industry in which burnout can, and often does, occur. The good news is that after running beverage programs and providing hospitality to literally thousands of guests, many restaurant beverage professionals acquire a wide array of skills they can translate into careers in other industries. They may leave the restaurant floor, but they bring with them a work ethic and expertise that parlays into higher-paying positions with more manageable lifestyles. Many companies, especially those that service the hospitality industry, keep a close eye out for talented expatriates looking to leave the restaurant island.

Seattle-based Luke Wohlers, an advanced sommelier certified by the Court of Master Sommeliers, began working in restaurants in 1996. After a career at top spots including Eleven Madison Park in New York City, Formaggio Kitchen in Boston, and RN74 and Herbfarm in Seattle, Wohlers started his own wine import and distribution company, Walden Selections, in 2014.

“I know what it’s like to be in a restaurant manager role, so I approach my relationships with respect for those positions,” Wohlers said. “And people tend to bond over shared experiences, so those interactions come from a place of mutual understanding.”

In addition to gaining a deep understanding of the world of wine, the skills Wohlers learned as a restaurant manager have helped him immensely in his new career, he said.

“I think the desire for efficiency and brevity rank at the top,” he said. “The essence of a good management culture is the ability to keep projects on track, all while bringing everyone along for a positive experience.”

Those who have worked in the restaurant industry also tend to have a customer-focused mindset, according to Erik McLaughlin, managing partner at Metis, a mergers and acquisitions advisory firm serving the adult beverage and hospitality industries.

“They tend to be able to see how the customer will see things, and this ability to anticipate another’s perspective and response is tremendously helpful in other professional endeavors,” he said.

McLaughlin’s restaurant career ranged from sommelier to general manager, and he also owned four restaurants.

“In restaurants, the job has to get done,” he said. “This urgency and utter commitment to accomplishing the task is something I often find lacking in people who haven’t worked in the restaurant trade, so I always lean towards hiring the person with restaurant experience. I value the type of esprit de corps that comes with restaurant life that is too rare in corporate life.”

Running a successful beverage program requires not only extensive product knowledge, but also a keen financial understanding.

“Being financially responsible for the health of a wine program requires some very role-specific practices,” said Jill Zimorski, a Chicago-based Champagne specialist for Strategic Group, a company that contracts with Moët Hennessy and focuses on education in sales and buying for beverage professionals.

“Being organized, understanding what things like ‘cost’ and ‘contribution margin’ mean, and buying the right things for your program, are all requirements,” she said

Zimorski spent more than a decade working as a sommelier and beverage director, including stints working with industry leaders like chef José Andrés and, most recently, as wine director for the Alinea Group in Chicago.

“No one tells you how much math there is in the wine business,” she said. “And I'm routinely surprised how many sommeliers don't know this stuff. In my current job, I do a fair amount of profit analysis [and] calculating for buyers who are contemplating pouring Champagnes, but not sure how to sell or mark them up. I spent my career in restaurants, so I can relate to just about everything a buyer is dealing with.”

Master sommelier Brian Cronin, based in New York City, spent years working around the country for top chefs and operators, including Charlie Trotter in Chicago and Gary Danko in San Francisco, as well as stints at resorts like St. Regis Monarch Beach in Dana Point, Calif. He parlayed that experience into a role as director of education for Palm Bay International, whose portfolio includes beverage brands that span 16 countries. Cronin's time in restaurants has not only landed him a coveted career off the floor, but also continually informs his work ethic.

“For me, it's about the pursuit of excellence in service; and service spans all aspects of your life, not just taking care of guests. It's in communication, follow-through, and being welcoming. It's loving your customer more than your ego.”

Now in a role where he trains sales teams to work with restaurant buyers, his restaurant experience is invaluable.

“In many ways, salespeople are sommeliers, just for wine buyers,” he said. “When I train our sales teams how to work with buyers, they need to understand their schedules so they can know when to serve them, know when to leave them alone, and how to anticipate their needs.”

Working in restaurants can mean a lifestyle of long work hours and constant demands in an often stressful environment. But it’s also an incredibly rich learning environment where skilled employees can experience the endless nuances of human nature, learn to prioritize complex tasks and, in the process, build a skill set that can span many industries.

Correction: November 20, 2017

This story has been updated with the correct year in which Luke Wohlers began his restaurant career.