

# Bacchus needs no martyrs: Wellness in the wine trade

Maintaining a healthy relationship with alcohol can be difficult when it functions as the subject, perk, and social fuel of your profession. But, as **Jim Clarke** reports, the wine trade is taking safe drinking increasingly seriously, and in ways that the rest of us should recognize

**D**arren Armstrong is a certified sommelier; he wears a pin. But it's not the usual Court of Master Sommeliers pin that catches one's eye. Instead, it's a plain metal circle with a line extending across it. It resembles a "no" symbol, though the crossbar does extend beyond the edge of the circle; paint it red and place it over a cigarette, a dog, or a ghost, and its meaning would be clear. Unlike the pin worn by his peers in the sommelier community, Armstrong's pin doesn't denote anything in particular about his abilities as a sommelier or what sort of training he has received. It could be worn by a sommelier in a Michelin-starred restaurant; it could be worn by a barman at a Kansas City dive bar. Both could have use for it. It simply tells people that Darren, or whoever wears it, is not drinking tonight.

In most lines of work, not many feel it necessary to state explicitly that they're not drinking on the job; it's generally assumed. But for bar and restaurant workers, it's a gray area, especially for those directly responsible for alcohol service, bartenders and sommeliers. "Can I buy you a drink?" is not an uncommon tip at the bar; a celebratory round of shots may include one for the bartender. For sommeliers, tasting wines as they open them is a usual part of service; many sommeliers don't spit in this context, for fear of putting off sensitive guests. Lucky sommeliers are often the beneficiaries of generous guests, who sometimes share a more substantial taste of a bottle, particularly if it's rare, expensive, or otherwise notable. Turning it down not only risks offense, it also means missing a chance to get to know a wine to which one might not otherwise even have access. That's

valuable information, an important part of a sommelier's training. The pin is intended as a subtle "no" to all that.

The pin was developed by Mark Goodwin, a bartender in San Francisco. He came up with the idea after seeing himself and many colleagues struggle to maintain their health and a healthy relationship with alcohol. Goodwin estimates that many bartenders will commonly consume four or five shots in an evening, and that's before any post-shift drinks. He hopes the pin can become a recognized symbol—and one that could forgo the awkwardness of a conversation about abstaining. Reasons for abstaining on a given shift can range from a hangover from the previous night, to an addiction problem. Whatever they may be, it's often a delicate subject, and the discussion, no matter how concise and succinct, can slow service and may cast a shadow over a guest's experience. No one wants to be reminded that someone else may be struggling to manage their alcohol consumption during their own fun, boozy evening. Ideally, the pin will protect both the wearer's privacy and the guest's experience. That's true in other contexts, too. When I met Armstrong at an industry event, he was carrying a beer. It turned out to be non-alcoholic, but like the pin, it had the effect of helping him blend in. He looked like he was doing exactly what everyone else around him was: consuming alcohol.

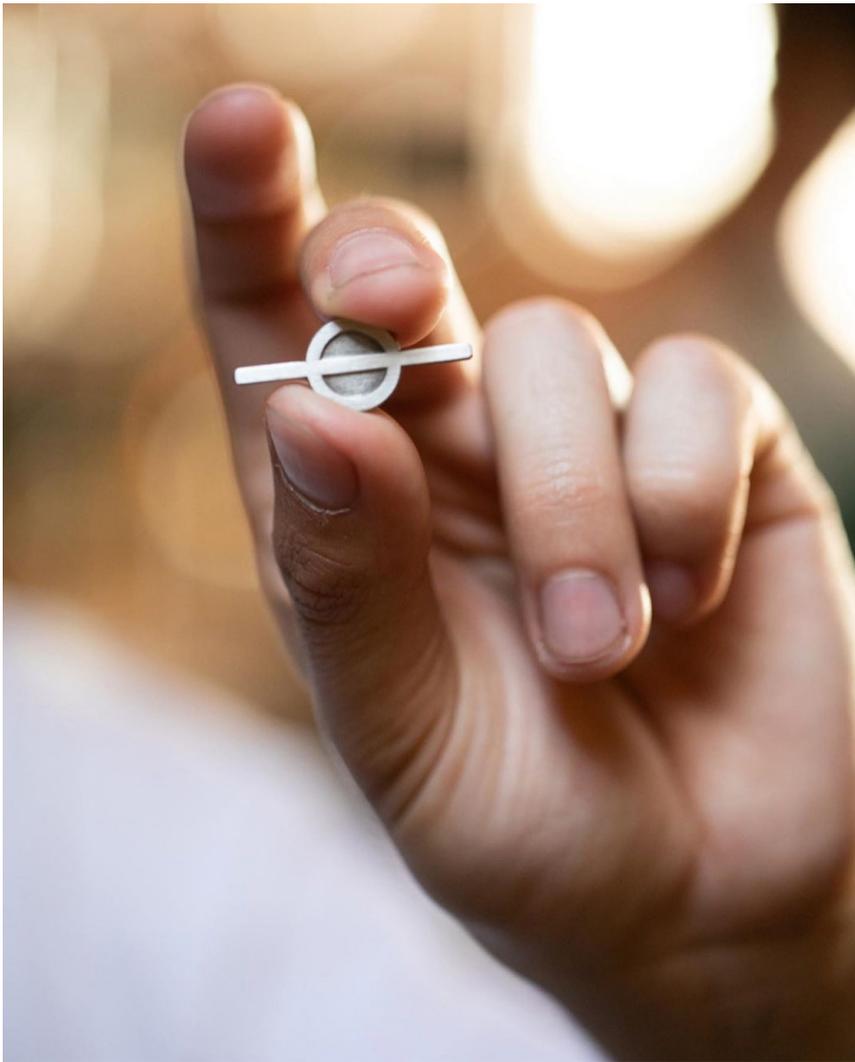
"The Pin" is one of the most visible, public-facing examples of the hospitality and alcohol industries' struggle with physical and mental health. "Wellness," the now all-embracing term for health and wellbeing, is of course receiving attention everywhere, but it's of

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particular relevance in the hospitality industry. Hours are long, and the work is stressful. Socially, it can mean difficulty maintaining relationships with those outside the industry. And aside from the more or less "legitimate" reasons for drinking or at least tasting alcohol mentioned above—check with your own boss for details—there are a great many opportunities to partake before and after the shift. In many restaurants, it is too easy to get one's hands on something that will "take the edge off" mid-shift. Some bosses turn a blind eye to some degree, though that's rarer than it used to be. But somewhere in between absolute control of alcohol and being able efficiently and speedily to serve guests, there are compromises that open the door to drinking. Aside from outright employee theft—a problem estimated to cost between \$3 billion and \$6 billion in the US—there is approved consumption: shift drinks, tastings, a round designed to boost morale after a tough night or to celebrate a good one. Few sommeliers or bartenders need to be up early. Post-shift, heavy drinking is common; peer pressure is often intense. There has long



been an expectation throughout the wine industry that you should be able to “handle your liquor”—it’s part of being a professional. If you spend your day selling alcohol, you also learn you don’t want to be the one who says no to a drink. Better to model the behavior you’d like to see in your guests and customers, and buy more wine. For that matter, industry connections often mean that at many restaurants and bars, the wine or something stronger may come to your table unpurchased as an industry benefit. It’s no accident that according to US government data, substance abuse is higher in the restaurant and hospitality industry than in any other field.

None of these things is new, but changes are bringing them to light. For wine professionals, the simple fact that wine service can be a long-term career

Above: A visible example of “the hospitality and alcohol industries’ struggle with physical and mental health.”

for more than a few people is a relatively recent development. It was harder to see and address the problem when people passed through a few restaurant jobs in their 20s and then moved on; most tolerated these conditions with the understanding that they were temporary, and maybe escaped before the negatives became too pronounced. Now that long-term restaurant work is becoming more common (in the US, in particular), there’s more continuity, and more people are looking for balance in the workplace.

A much louder voice followed in the wake of the #metoo movement. There can be little doubt that, at least on some occasions, the behavior of figures like Mario Batali, New York restaurateur Ken Friedman, and New Orleans’s John Besh was in part inspired, indulged, and excused by the consumption of alcohol. As NPR put it, “Free-flowing alcohol and late-night work make restaurants a notorious hotbed for sexual harassment.”

Finally, wellness has targeted alcohol in the media and public consciousness as well. Whether it’s called the “new sobriety,” “sober-curious,” or “mindful drinking,” it is encouraging people to rethink their drinking—or at least talk about doing so. Those in the worlds of hospitality and the wine trade are not immune. Armstrong told me he was taking a year-long break from drinking not because of any difficulties but because he wanted to reset and see how he felt without the long-term effects of alcohol consumption.

### Heightened health challenges

Most of us in the wine industry come to an understanding with ourselves on how we manage our health in light of our career. For those who start as sommeliers, it might seem like the inevitable move off the floor as one ages would solve a lot of problems. Fewer late nights, less peer pressure to drink after every exhausting shift, less easy access to alcohol. But if you stay in the industry, working for a wholesaler or in marketing, the challenges change only slightly. There may be fewer exhausting hours on your feet (though not if you’re a sales rep in New York City), but you may also be expected to call on accounts during opening hours to knock back a glass or a bottle of that Chianti you struggled to place on the list. Big meals entertaining crucial clients at indulgent restaurants—and obligations to party with them into the wee hours—are common. I hear the world’s smallest violin being played in sympathy, but that’s not the point. In the main, wellness talk is about weight, sleep, cholesterol, and the like; mentally, it might mean stress management or anxiety. That is to say, it’s about the same wellness issues everyone faces in life, wine industry or no, but issues that wine, or rather alcohol, can exacerbate. The health challenges are inflamed by the defining element of the industry, wine, and the food and, to a degree, the lifestyle that come with it.

At the most serious end of the spectrum, a position in the trade can become entirely untenable for some. Every once in a while, someone drops out of the industry, usually with no notice. They often go from being the life of the party to being entirely absent. Ten years ago, I knew a talented young woman who worked for a boutique New York wine

shop and moved on to work for a top importer in the city. Then she disappeared. She eventually resurfaced, at least to the extent that I know what she's up to, thanks to the magic of social media. Prone to addiction, she loved the industry in part because it was the ultimate enabler: Alcohol was her job, giving her carte blanche to drink. Once she realized she couldn't find a livable balance, she attempted to make changes and stay within the industry as a non-drinker. She had the support of her company but, after several months, ultimately decided she had to get out. She loved her job and the world of wine, even without drinking, but didn't know how to handle working in the alcohol industry as a non-drinker. The tension between her own mental and physical health needs and the environment could not be resolved. I think she'd have an easier time of it now, but it's hard to say. I don't pretend that non-drinkers will ever be a major portion of the wine trade. However, whether and how much a non-drinker feels at ease in the trade may be a good gauge of how much we are an industry that likes the inebriating effects of alcohol, and how much we are an industry that likes wine.

Given the peer pressure and expectations that come with working in the trade, most responses to these health issues are individual, personal, and private. There was, and often still is, a reluctance to talk to others in the industry about such problems, about wanting or needing to drink less. I think people have traditionally instead turned to others outside the industry for guidance on how to handle these challenges, for better or worse. The response to overconsumption often goes well beyond simply drinking less. I know several vegetarians and gluten-free individuals in the trade who chose that dietary restriction as an arbitrary brake on their dining. Some respond to heroic bouts of drinking with even more impressive acts of athleticism, taking part in marathons, Iron Mans, and the like. A wine sales rep I know embraced transcendental meditation, the better to manage the ups and downs of the job.

Social media has at least in part turned peer pressure on its head. Yes, there are any number of people posting about their marathon drinking sessions, showing off a lineup of "unicorn wines"

and coveted bottles. But there are also people posting a map of their run, bragging about their dry January, or checking in to a yoga retreat. Sometimes it's the same person, just on a different day, making up for overindulgence one evening with a day of healthy living. As social-media environments go, it's remarkably judgment-free; a post from a party gets views and likes, but so does crossing the finish line of a 5K race.

### Striking a better balance

As members of the industry become more and more open about their struggles, companies are responding with internal programs that provide a support structure for employees. Sometimes it takes a problem at the top to spur change. David McMillan and Fred Morin built Montreal's Joe Beef into a palace of excess for all things food and drink and, as hosts, felt obligated to live the life they were providing for their guests. But having an over-the-top evening as an occasional guest and living it every day are two different propositions. It took an intervention to bring McMillan back to a survivable way of life. He was advised to leave the wine and restaurant world, but he had never worked in another industry. It took working shifts as a chef at a friend's restaurant to convince himself that he could work in a restaurant without drinking. He says his new, more balanced life has encouraged his staff to do the same. He also put money into funding therapy and even rehabilitation for employees who needed it. Similarly, it took a string of staff suicides before the owner of Sacramento's Mulvaney's B&L realized the way work pressures were affecting the mental wellbeing of its employees. The company implemented a peer-to-peer counseling program supported by local health providers, acknowledging that the pressure of restaurant work was putting demands on staff that needed to be addressed. The program has expanded into other parts of the Sacramento restaurant community, with those facing mental-health issues at other companies coming to Mulvaney's for group sessions and then taking the program back to their own restaurants. While the restaurant industry provides the most public examples of these changes, similar innovations are happening in the wine industry as well.



Until 2018, there was little effort to talk about these problems at an industry-wide level, but in March of that year Rebecca Hopkins and Cathy Huyghe formed A Balanced Glass as a forum or support group for industry members. The group is international in scope, with members everywhere from South Africa to Washington; they have accumulated over 500 members since they began—winery owners, winemakers, writers, sales reps, and others. By acting as a gathering point for stories, ideas, and reassurance, they hope to empower members with the tools to take better care of themselves. That can mean a post from a member on how meditation has helped deal with stress, or a link to a new study on the effects of alcohol that members might want to be aware of. Some posts have looked askance at the sober-curious movement, reminding members not to feel guilty for promoting or consuming alcohol, as long they're doing so responsibly. It may sound like hand-holding, but it's a conversation that hasn't previously had an outlet. For those who are struggling, being able to turn to a forum that may not be directly tied to one's workplace makes reflection and communication much easier. A Balanced Glass has developed beyond its virtual presence as well. Look around the edges of a professional trade event, and you'll see it organizing a yoga session or a refreshment lounge. It has also created a tool to start conversations, let people know what they stand for, and spread the word. Something discreet but eye-catching: A pin. ■

Above: Rebecca Hopkins who, with Cathy Huyghe, founded the growing A Balanced Glass forum in 2018.