

# SOMETHING TO SAY

conversations with wine

words  
**DOUG GEYER** | photography  
**MARLENE ROUNDS**

Pascaline Lepeltier closes her eyes and listens as unspoken words and primordial visions draw her into a story both ancient and ongoing. Though this conversation began on a sloped hillside in the Loire Valley in 2002, it stirs her today all the same. The archived snippet was not preserved on parchment or disc but in a bottle of Chenin Blanc.

As a sommelier, Lepeltier is an interpreter. She understands the language of the sun and moon, soil and grape, after years of study and thousands of tastings have honed her senses to experience history through her nose and tongue. The earliest winemakers began recording this dialogue long before Edison patented the phonograph cylinder and Bell and Berliner perfected the gramophone. Moments that eluded photos and books were bottled instead.

Like producers in a studio, growers and winemakers bring together and capture the voices and notes of nature. Sommeliers read the music, explain the lyrics, and teach us the words so we can sing along. Together, they are also ambassadors. As they plant and harvest, mix and age, swirl and smell, points on a map illuminate, villages and vineyards unfold. Escorting eager travelers to points in the past while enjoying the company of friends and family in the present is their goal and joy.

## Tickets to Terroir

It was a 1937 Château d'Yquem, a sweet Bordeaux, that first spoke to Lepeltier and convinced her to migrate to the world of wine after earning a master's in philosophy. Her dedication was rewarded when she earned the rarefied status of Master Sommelier in 2014. In 2018, she made history as the first woman to be selected in the sommelier category of the Meilleurs Ouvriers de France (Best Craftsmen of France) as well as Best French Sommelier. As managing partner and sommelier at Racines NY, Lepeltier is building another beautiful list of organic, biodynamic wines from small estates.

"Deep knowledge of a region takes really a lot of time. Visiting as well as tasting over and over, a lot of personal connections, and you can't get that overnight. Even my region, Loire, I'm so far away from what I want to know about the region to really understand it. I would love to have way more time to understand the history and culture of different regions to really understand the links between the past and future. I can't agree more about wine's ability to get that extraordinary experience

of moving through space and time, crop and man. Wine can absolutely do that. And we must fight for that."

## Travel Companions

Learning how to be an expert matchmaker is another hallmark of a sensitive and seasoned sommelier. At Cincinnati's Restaurant L, a collaboration of Jean-Robert de Cavel and Richard Brown, sommelier Max Pelkey collaborates with the chef so that diners can be taken on a transportive journey.

"We have this stuffed quail with a Madeira sauce. Quail is light, not too gamey, when it's prepped right. There's this wonderful wine that I really enjoy from Savoie, which is in the Swiss Alps near Switzerland, using Jacquere—a white varietal. I've fallen in love with this white wine that we've paired with the Madeira sauce. With a lot of French cuisine, the sauce drives the choice of wine. That's a lot of what I'm doing now."

Creating an atmosphere where customers feel comfortable to express their own preferences as they listen to recommendations is an intentional choice at both Restaurant L and two of Cincinnati's burgeoning wineries.

## Grafting Vines to a Tree

Both Revel OTR and The Skeleton Root celebrate the winemaking roots of family and Cincinnati in their own way. Striving to honor both familial and regional tradition while giving their grapes and guests a chance to express themselves is central to their mission.

Growing up in Kokomo, Indiana, with parents who had emigrated from Northern Italy, Anthony Maieron of







Revel OTR has always loved the way that wine brings people together. Memories of watching his father laugh with his engineer friends as they drank his garage wine spurred Maieron to try his own hand at this handed-down craft. Revel started when wife and business partner, Jodi, wanted to reclaim their basement from his ever-increasing number of barrels. Maieron's mother had encouraged his father in a similar fashion. Along with John and Amy Coleman, the team at Revel stays true to the magic that happened in that garage and the casual culture of wine found in many parts of Europe.

"Let's carry good wine, make a recommendation, give them a bottle you think they're going to like, and they'll go sit down and have a great conversation with friends. That's what we want people to experience at Revel," shared Maieron. Also at their core is giving the OTR's diverse community a place to gather as well as empowering local nonprofits.

Alex Sena, winemaker at Revel, grew up in a winemaking family and eventually managed the largest planted vineyard in the Ohio Valley. Though he has a vision for the kind of wine he'd like to make with each harvest, sometimes the grapes have a different idea.

"Just this last year we got a lot of Sangiovese—our flagship wine and our favorite grape to work with. It came in, and the sugars were a little lower, the tannins were a little lower, and it was telling me, 'I don't want to be treated like your typical Sangiovese that may be a little more age-worthy and tannic. I want to be treated like a younger, fruit-forward wine.' Like a Toscana Rosso, an everyday table wine. Still beautiful. But that's what the grapes were telling me they wanted to be."

Sena prefers to minimally intervene throughout the entire process, a philosophy shared by one of his mentors, Kate MacDonald, owner and winemaker at The Skeleton Root. She is intent on reviving the forgotten story of Cincinnati's own viticulture and letting the grapes be the story in the glass.







“For me, wine truly is the story of a place, in liquid form, of a particular plant and the folks who influenced that. [At] The Skeleton Root, we’re not focused on telling the story of California wine. We’re really focused on this rediscovery of the Ohio River Valley and what that means in the wine world in terms of the grape varieties that can be mostly sustainably raised here, the wine styles that can be made from those. It’s really an exploration, in a sense, of what the future of this place can be, because it does have such a beautiful, storied past.”

The mystical collaboration between nature, grape, grower, and winemaker can never be reduced to a formula. Previous harvests, predicted weather patterns, and how grapes might continue to grow in the barrel and in the bottle are only guideposts. A desired destination is not guaranteed when you’re allowing Mother Nature to direct

the show. But when all these elements cooperate and coalesce, it’s like a murmuration of starlings. We pause and wonder, bearing witness to a mesmerizing spectacle.

MacDonald continues, “With wine, it’s this really beautiful bridge between science, art, and agriculture. And there’s a lot of culture in all of that, around the practices in the region. It goes from a grower and a maker, and the people who consume it and how they consume it. So there are so many elements that wine touches in facets of our life that we probably don’t even fully understand. I think it’s such a beautiful story.”