



A Chat with ...
ERIK SEGELBAUM
He Knows Wine!


BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

Food & Wine Magazine deemed Erik Segelbaum as one of the top nine sommeliers in 2019. Erik is one of less than 600 people in the world that holds an Advanced Sommelier Certificate through the Court of Master Sommeliers. He is a Certified Specialist of Wine (CSW) through the Society of Wine Educators and a Wine and Spirits Locations Specialist (with distinction) for both port and Champagne. In other words, Erik knows wine.

In an exclusive interview with Erik, we discussed his “sink or swim” transition into the wine world, preferred pastimes, favorite Tuesday, Saturday and special event wines, SOMLYAY LLC, newest projects, exceptional wine values, and his food and wine philosophy.

HOW DID YOU LAND IN THE WINE INDUSTRY?

At 13 I secured my first kitchen job, and over the next nine years I moved up to Chef de Cuisine at Founders, the fine-dining French restaurant at the Park Hyatt in Philadelphia. Chefs tend to drink a lot; and as I matured, I changed from drinking alcohol just for the sake of drinking alcohol to drinking it for flavor. In my early career, the restaurant sommelier often gave me good wine left over from tasting events or ones designated for removal from the cellar list. I drank and cooked with these wines.



At 22 I had the opportunity to move to South Beach in Miami and work at an experimental luxury boutique hotel. The concept chef was bringing in his entire team, so there was a position for me as a first-line cook, which was well below my current status, or I could opt to run the front of the house (FOH). The FOH position typically requires one third as many hours as I was putting in as a chef and pays three times the money. With all of my student loans, I figured I could do FOH for a while. To prepare, I studied and took the Introductory Sommelier Exam and passed.

Within a few months of my passing the exam, the head sommelier and the wine director left — one quit and the other was fired. Suddenly I was the only one with any formal education about wine. I quickly realized that the more wine knowledge I had, the more money I'd make. Life was crazy. I was responsible for the restaurant's wine, bar and penthouse programs. It was my job to participate in the South Beach Food & Wine event; and when famous chefs arrived, I paired their foods with delicious wines. I got thrown into the industry, I love it, and I have had an incredible career ever since.

HOW DO YOU LIKE TO SPEND YOUR TIME WHEN YOU ARE NOT WORKING?

I love being with my fiancée Ryann Deering. We both work in the wine and hospitality industries and we cherish our TV + couch + cuddles time. I like to keep active and I enjoy snowboarding, traveling and cooking. I often throw elaborate dinner parties for eight or more people, and I own enough service for 12-14 plated courses without repeating a vessel.

WHAT ARE YOUR FAVORITE TUESDAY, SATURDAY AND SPECIAL EVENT WINES?

That is a hard question to answer because my favorite changes based on the seasons, my mood, the time of day, my disposition and whether I have been traveling. However, it is safe to say that riesling is always the answer. On a Tuesday I might choose a reasonably priced Washington State dry riesling, on a Saturday maybe a more expensive Washington State riesling or one from Alsace, Germany or Austria. On a special occasion I might break out a 20-, 30- or even 50-year-old riesling from Germany or Alsace; but to be fair, my Tuesday night wine might be more expensive than what other people would have on hand. I also love Sicilian reds.

WHAT IS SOMLYAY LLC?

I hate to use the word, but basically I am a beverage, wine, and hospitality consultant. There are three arms to SOMLYAY LLC.

- I work with brand new and existing businesses in the hotel and restaurant community. I write beverage programs, help organize cellars and wine lists, and offer training.

- I assist suppliers and buyers in improving their operations, and I teach suppliers how to build bridges to buyers.

- I help my private clients with dinner parties, wine events, private education events, employee parties, cellar building and management, or anything else related to wine and hospitality.

DO YOU HAVE ANY EXCITING CURRENT PROJECTS?

I have many. However, two of the most interesting are Wine Riot 2.0. and my participation with a new bed and breakfast and their wine bar. I am the new host for Wine Riot 2.0. In the past, the event focused on an abundance of wine drinking, and now we focus on wine education through wine tasting. During the three-hour event, attendees can visit a number of tables.

- There are varietal-based tables where they find selections of the same grape varietal from different countries. Tasters increase their understanding of how that grape changes throughout regions of the world.

- Next, visitors can stop at a regional table where they will find tastings of several wines from a specific region. Tasters might learn what a Super Tuscan is or discover facts about different designations for Chianti.

- Finally, attendees can stop at a table and learn general wine concepts like the difference between dry and sweet wine, or how to distinguish between the old-world and new-world wines.

My second project is assisting a family-owned construction company in the opening of their new bed and breakfast and wine bar in Sperryville, Virginia. I am working with them to create an incredible wine bar program.

CAN YOU RECOMMEND ANY GREAT "NEW" WINE FINDS?

- Portugal is delivering incredibly delicious wines for excellent value at every price point.

- South Africa has some excellent wines.

- Washington State has many quality wines at a substantial value.

- Incredible things are happening in Australia. The Mediterranean varietals are thriving in the McLaren Vale region and several other parts of the country.

- Several sparkling wines from Tasmania rival Champagnes.

WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY OF WINE AND FOOD?

Drink what you want and eat what you want. Relax about it. What I want to say is, there are millions of wines, so why not drink what you want and choose your meal around it. The difference between a good pairing and a great pairing is patience between the sips and bites.