

# WINE SPECIALIST & CONNOISSEUR LESLIE SBROCCO

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

Leslie Sbrocco knows wine. She is an award-winning consultant, speaker, author, and television host most known for her entertaining approach to wine. I met Leslie over 20 years ago on a Crystal Cruises trip to Alaska when she taught seminars about wine. Today she speaks about the wonders of wine and how to pair this delicious beverage with food. You can watch Leslie on prominent talk shows, one of her four TV shows, inside classrooms, or at virtual tasting events.

While visiting my hometown of Petaluma, California, I met up with Leslie for a casual interview. She takes the fear and formality out of wine and wine pairings; she makes wine approachable and fun.

**You speak with authority about wine. How do you make it approachable to everyone?**

I encourage people to integrate wine into their everyday life. I do not put wine on a pedestal. Having made wine and taken winemaking courses at UC Davis, I understand the technicality of making it. Producing good wine is very difficult, but I've made it. I have also made lousy wine.

A long time ago I was determined to become a wine judge. To become proficient, I needed to learn everything I could about wine, including knowing and comprehending the technical pieces, the subtle nuances, and the fun parts. If you are going to be a specialist in something, you need to understand every aspect and be able to present it to people in a way that they can relate it to their lives.

**Why do you love what you do?**

I love everything about wine, the stories, the people involved, and the role wine plays in cultures around the





world. I love to write about the people behind the wine. I teach classes and do virtual tastings that help people discover why they like this or do not like that, but it's up to them to figure it out.

**You have made quite a name for yourself. What prompted your TV shows?**

Years ago I asked myself how to combine my love of food and wine. I wrote an article about wine for a local newspaper and built my career from there. The internet got involved, and one of my wine-loving contacts at Microsoft hired me to be the wine producer of "Sidewalk," Microsoft Corporation's attempt to create a group of comprehensive web portals oriented toward specific cities, basically a city guide.

After Sidewalk, I built a wine website for the local paper, the Press Democrat. The paper's parent company was the New York Times, and they asked me to create a wine website for them. I worked hard to build a network of people and wrote my first book, Wine for Women. After the book was published, speaking engagements followed. Later, I circled back to TV, did CBS Wine Minute, and the Today Show invited me on because of my book. I work hard and go for what I think will make me happy.

**What is your favorite wine?**

I usually say the wine in my glass, but that is not true. It is always Champagne. Sparkling wines would be a general category, but rosé Champagne is my favorite. I also enjoy great world-class sparkling wines because they go with everything.

**Can you recommend any exciting new wine destinations?**

When considering wine in Italy, people typically think of Tuscany, Umbria, and even lesser-known places like Prosecco. However, Sicily is one of the prettiest places to try Italian wine, and it is an undiscovered treasure with fabulous wines. I would not say it is new, but I fell in love with Sicily a few years ago before the pandemic.

**What is your philosophy on wine and food?**

Drink what you like and eat what you want. Call it a day and enjoy. But if I must look at

the tools I use when I pair food and wine, I consider the sauces and the spices. I ask myself what the style of the wine is. You want the two to dance together and not wrestle with each other. Pairing a light, delicate wine with a big, robust dish is hard. Keep them more similar in style but use the complement or contrast philosophy if they are not.

**What are your favorite Tuesday night, Saturday night, and special occasion wines?**

I love rosé, but I am an equal opportunity pinot noir drinker and appreciate all styles. I love the lighter and leaner ones but also enjoy a few bigger ones like those from the Santa Rita Hills area. These are my favorites: a rosé with Greek chicken and hummus on Tuesday night; Saturday night bubbles with anything and everything; and for a special occasion, a robust 10-year-old Napa cabernet sauvignon or an old Bordeaux with a big steak. I also love Chilean cabernet sauvignon.

**Do you have a favorite pairing?**

Potato chips and Champagne, or you can exchange the chips for popcorn. It is fun to try a tasting I did on the Today Show with bowls of popcorn topped with various things like flavored salts, chili powder, olive oil, or truffle oil. Anything salty with bubbles is excellent.

**Where have you had your most memorable pairing?**

I was in San Francisco 15 years ago at one of the restaurants on my show. It is no longer there, but I sat at the bar and had a Kabinett-style (made from fully ripe grapes) German riesling. I believe it was a Fritz Hagg, a drier-style riesling with just a whisper of sweetness. The wine arrived with a grilled onion and radicchio salad topped with blue cheese and a simple vinaigrette. The high acid in the wine and the high acid in the vinaigrette complemented one another. The radicchio's bitterness and the smokiness from grilling the vegetables did not overpower the wine. I remember thinking, "oh, my gosh." This pairing has stuck in my mind ever since.

**If someone wanted to begin collecting wine, what steps would you recommend?**

You have to taste and try it. Collectible means

many things: are you keeping them for 20 years, are you building a world-class cellar, or are you just putting bottles away to put a couple of years on them to enjoy later? Play around, buy two or three bottles, and open them on different dates. Taste each over a year or hold each for a year and see what it is like. Watch for the evolution over time. Start with four or five categories and invest in a few different styles of cabernets and chardonnays.

If you like sweet wines, purchase a sauternes or late-harvest California wine. Buy a few bottles of each and try them over time to build your collection. Lastly, buy a Coravin.

Watch Leslie's shows if you want to learn more about wine.

You can find Leslie sharing about wine on a variety of television shows. She was a featured judge on the PBS national series The Wine-makers and wrote content for the TBS show Cougartown. Leslie frequently appears on CNN, the Hallmark Channel's Better TV, QVC, and NBC's Today Show.

Leslie hosted a restaurant review show on KQED in San Francisco called Check, Please! and her current new series, 100 Days, Drinks, Dishes & Destinations, takes viewers around the world. This show emphasizes Leslie's appreciation and understanding of the history and culture around great food and wine. ♦

