

Rising Black Voices in Wine

by [W&S Team](#) • September 1, 2020

illustrations by Matt Williams

Tahiirah Habibi made news this spring when she posted a video recalling her experience with the Court of Master Sommeliers. She not only brought about institutional change in the way the group's members use the term “master,” but also helped elevate the discussion about race in the wine community. At *Wine & Spirits*, our editors realized we knew many Black wine professionals, but we were not consciously aware of their struggles in the community.

We set out to open a conversation, starting with trailblazers like Dottie Gaiter, who hadn't read a single Black voice in wine when she and her husband started their wine column for *The Wall Street Journal* in 1998. Veterans like Gaiter paved the way for the next generation in wine, who also shared their stories with us. In the 53 interviews we conducted, we heard many speak of having to be twice as good as their white peers to get recognition. Another recurrent theme was solidarity with other groups marginalized in the wine business—women, other BIPOC and LGBTQ+ folks, and those with disabilities. But, by far, the most common theme, here in the words of NYC sommelier David Blackburn, was the importance of “seeing faces who looked like me” in the career he was undertaking. To all our colleagues of color: We see you, and the next generation can see itself in you.

We present here a small slice of the burgeoning Black wine community, broken into two groups. Click each heading to read more in depth about the featured individuals. On the pages linked below, the faces of the Trailblazers, those who have firmly established themselves in the wine community and are now mentors to the next generation, are depicted in photographs. The illustrations highlight that next wave, the Rising Black Voices in Wine, those whose impact is starting to resonate across our whole industry, and to the benefit of all.

Rising Black Voices in Wine: Media & Events

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RISING VOICE

Shakera Jones

Founder, BlackGirlsDineToo, NYC

Dining out, the more reservations Shakera Jones and her friends booked at restaurants, the more they realized that the only people who looked like them were bussing the tables. That's when she launched her blog, BlackGirlsDineToo, in 2018. "I created the blog to show that Black people are in these spaces, too," Jones says.

Jones recalls the sparse results of her initial search for Black figures in wine—though she did find her writing mentor, Julia Coney. She also started following wine educator Larissa Dubose, who presented wine in a factual but fun way through short, informational video clips.

"Larissa gave me a starting point and got me posting my journey on Instagram," says Jones, who has started hosting weekly Instagram Live tastings with other Black sommeliers. She has written for publications including *Food & Wine* and *SevenFifty Daily* and now she's launching a podcast, *A Glass for Every Palate*, in partnership with SOMM TV. —S.L.



"I love the way Shakera talks about wine," says Carlton McCoy, MS. "She's matter of fact, jovial and playful. It's that type of energy that will bring more people to wine."

Rising Black Voices in Wine: Sommeliers

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TRAILBLAZER

Tahira Habibi

As the president of the Pan-Hellenic Council at Penn State, and the Homecoming Queen her senior year, Tahira Habibi spent a lot of time with the school administration. "I was curious about wine because I saw the power that surrounded it. I didn't want to be embarrassed and I didn't want to embarrass my culture," she says, which is why she set out to build her wine skills spending time in Europe and as a sommelier in Miami. Habibi founded the Hue Society in 2017 and the annual Black Wine Experience in New Orleans in 2018. This year, she founded the Roots Fund with Carlton McCoy, MS, and Ikimi Dubose, building pathways for new Black wine professionals. —Joshua Greene

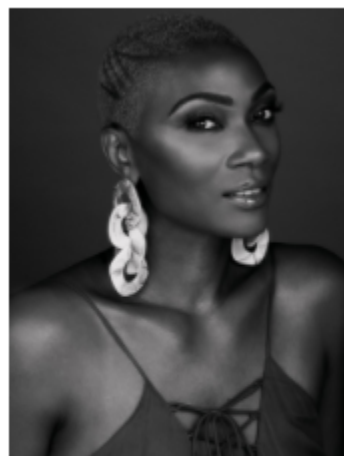


Photo by Focus n Color Visuals

Rising Black Voices in Wine: Sales & Marketing

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TRAILBLAZER

Carlton McCoy, MS

Carlton McCoy's meteoric rise in the wine industry started at *CityZen* in DC, where wine director Andrew Myers became his mentor. McCoy was only 22 at the time; by 28, he was a Master Sommelier running the wine program at Aspen's *The Little Nell*. Now he's president and CEO of Heitz, one of Napa Valley's iconic wineries. He's also teamed up with Tahiiarah Habibi and Ikimi Dubose to found the *Roots Fund*. "We talked about our roots and our families," he explains. "That's where we get our drive, what pushes us forward. I want to go into the great cellars of the US and see Black winemakers; I want to see Black grape growers. If we can't help mentor, we'll have others who can." —J.G.



Giving & Getting Help

ORGANIZATIONS

The Roots Fund

Tahiirah Habibi, Ikimi Dubose and Carlton McCoy, MS founded this fund to provide resources and financial support to minorities in the wine industry.

