

Drawing Inspiration From Innovation

2019 Unified Symposium set to feature trends, tech and packaging to help build better brands

By Stacy Briscoe



Wine economist Mike Veseth speaks during the state of the industry session during the 2018 Unified Wine & Grape Symposium.



“I’ve attended Unified for the past 22 years, and it’s been a part of my professional career since the beginning,” said Lance Winters, master distiller at St. George Spirits in Alameda, Calif., and the 2019 Wine & Grape Symposium keynote speaker.

With a professional career in distilled spirits, Winters promises to provide a unique perspective on innovation within the wine industry. “The distilled beverage sector is heavily steeped in tradition, even more than in our own (wine) industry,” said Tom Collins, assistant professor of grape and wine chemistry at Washington State University and co-chair of the 2019 symposium in a statement. “Sometimes, breaking with tradition can lead to successes.”

In an interview with *Wines & Vines*, Winters said he believes that many people enter either the wine or spirits industry because of tradition, but then rely too heavily on traditional practices. “Think of it as a conversation,” he said. “If you say the same thing as everyone else, no one will listen. But if you jump in with a new inspiration, you can be a conversation starter in the industry.”

Winters said his keynote speech will cover where he’s drawn inspiration and how he’s used that to build the St. George Spirit brand. Since joining the distillery in 1996, Winters has helped expand the business from a dedicated *eau-de-vie* distillery to one that includes a complete portfolio of spirits, including

single-malt whiskey, absinthe, rum, gin and vodkas, among others. “I learned distillation as a medium for self-communication, self-expression. I thought about what I wanted to express and used distillation to get my message across,” Winters said.

He acknowledged that there are those in the wine industry who have done the same, citing Dave Phinney as an example. “Think about The Prisoner. There’s no winery or vineyard associated with that wine. All Phinney had was an idea for a non-traditional blend and a non-traditional label, flying in the face of all conventional wisdom,” Winters said, pointing out that The Prisoner has been bought and sold as an identity only, several times over. In 2016, the Prisoner and a few other brands created by Phinney were sold by Huneus Vintners to Constellation Brands for \$285 million. “There are no assets, just a label and the goodwill that comes behind it,” he said.

But, Winters warned, to be real, genuine and sincere has to come from whoever is trying to break into the business. “I can only ask, ‘Have you found something that really turns you on?’ And if you have, work with that,” he said.

Symposium program

While past symposiums have featured an overarching theme or focus, this year Collins and his co-chair, Nichola Hall of Scott Laboratories, said in a conversation with *Wines & Vines* that

they specifically chose not to do so for the 2019 event, to be held in Sacramento, Calif. “Our focus is on keeping the program topical, current and relevant,” Collins said.

“There’s no set overlying theme,” added Hall. “But if there were, it would be about looking forward: rosé as a section of the market and not just a fad; implementation of technology in all sectors of the industry; innovations in packaging and branding design; and just continuing to be a successful industry.”

Rosé for more than a day

Hall said that during the 2018 symposium the discussion about the growing popularity of drinking pink revolved around The Nielsen Co.’s market research data report, which found a 64% increase in rosé wine sales within the last five years, growing it to a more than \$300 million market and proving the wine style is more than just a passing trend.

As such, the Unified board decided to highlight rosé during this year’s joint tasting session. The session will dive deep into how the upward trend of rosé in the consumer marketplace has influenced both grapegrowing practices and winemaking techniques. “There’s a lot of material we can cover that will be helpful to attendees,” Collins said. “Rosé can be a range of varieties, so there’s a lot of information about how growers should approach farming — if rosé is the goal. And then there’s a lot of winemaking techniques that can be used, and those approaches will be discussed as well.”

For each wine presented during the session, a winemaker and a sales and marketing person from the winery will be there to discuss both sides of the rosé production process — from soil to shelf-talkers. Jason Haas, partner and general manager of Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles, Calif., will be on the panel representing his winery’s Dianthus (a southern Rhône-inspired blend of Mourvèdre, Grenache and Counoise) and Patelin de Tablas (a Provence-inspired Rhône blend of Grenache, Mourvèdre, Counoise and Syrah) rosé wines.

The two are very disparate rosés, with the Dianthus appearing much darker and “traditional pink” in color and the Patelin de Tablas exuding a much more subdued, faded-peach hue. When asked about the marketable differences between the two and whether Tablas Creek crafts either of these wines to either meet consumer expectations or to challenge the palate, Haas said the answer is a complicated one.

“In the market, there’s definitely a bias against darker-colored rosés,” Haas said. Thus, he said, most of what Tablas Creek sells in the wholesale market is the lighter Patelin de Tablas rosé. However, in the tasting room, where both rosés are offered, the winery sells more of the darker Dianthus (\$30) than the Patelin (\$25), even though it is slightly more expensive.

CHANGE OF VENUE IN 2020

The Unified Wine & Grape Symposium will be celebrating its 25th year Jan. 29-31, continuing to draw professionals from all sectors of the wine industry in what is touted as the largest wine industry event in the Western Hemisphere.

While the total number of attendees isn’t officially released until the last day of the event, according to the event’s records, Unified has hosted between 12,000 and 14,000 wine industry attendees and showcased more than 650 wine industry suppliers each year for the last decade.

“We’ve actually been constrained by the size of the venue and have had to be creative, finding additional places for supplier booths,” said the events co-chair Tom Collins, referring to the Sacramento Convention Center, where Unified has been held since 1996.

Following the 2019 symposium, the convention center is scheduled to undergo a major renovation and expansion. “We expect the venue will be a tremendous improvement regarding space,” Collins said. The 2020 Symposium, scheduled for Feb. 4-6, will be held at Sacramento’s Cal Expo (site of the state fair). According to Unified’s event coordinators the 2021 Symposium will return to the Sacramento Convention Center.

“I would say we fall on the spectrum toward making the wines purposefully different from one another and explaining which (Rhône) traditions we’re riffing on with each wine and letting the customers make their decisions,” Haas said. “I don’t know that our job is to challenge the wine consumer. But to enlighten them? Definitely.”

Haas, along with Tablas Creek senior assistant winemaker Chelsea Franchi, will discuss their specific vineyard and winemaking techniques during the tasting session.

Tech “TED Talk”

Another new session to the Unified program is Thursday’s general session discussing technology in the wine industry. From drones in the vineyard to computer analysis in the winery and even chatbots and digital sommeliers interacting with wine consumers — again, every sector of the wine industry will be represented on the panel and in the discussion.

“The new ‘TED Talk’ format is new this year to keep the discussion lively and moving,” said Collins, who will also be moderating the session. “We’ll have talks that will cover four industries: winemaking, grapegrowing, business and marketing.”

Speakers will discuss products that are currently used or will be available in the near future, and where technology is headed and where there will be opportunities to use it in each of the four basic industry sectors.

Winters said from a distilling standpoint, he’s always interested in the latest technology regarding measurements such as mass flow meters, alcohol content analysis and filtration. “It takes away the grunt work and gives us a better sense of confidence when reporting our numbers for federal purposes,” he said.

In regard to the wine industry, Winters believes technology that can assess vineyard health will become increasingly important.

“With the way climate change is starting to take hold, anything that’s able to give good soil moisture readings on an ongoing basis so vineyard owners can take care of the grapes properly will prove beneficial,” he said. “The problem is only going to get worse, so monitoring soil and vine health is a priority.”

Package and brand design

Winters said what initially enticed him to attend Unified was the opportunity to find new, innovative companies that supply the products he needed to help expand his business — from bottle suppliers to label designers and even marketing experts. “To me, this is where it (building a brand) starts,” he said.

Trade floor vendor tours at the symposium have always included grapegrowing- and winemaking-specific tours. The 2019 Unified Wine & Grape Symposium will be the first to include a marketing-specific tour, focused on packaging and brand design. “According to our (the symposium’s) marketing subcommittee, there’s a strong interest in the innovation of packaging,” Collins said. “And given our discussion about the rise in rosé, it seemed like a timely thing to include,” he added, referring to the sheer numbers of rosés in the marketplace and the need for wineries to stand out on the shelves.

According to Nielsen’s market research data report, 4,289 new wine items have been launched within the last year, and 80% of wine-purchasing decisions are made at the shelf. “Walking down the aisle is like walking into a singles bar,” Winters said. “Everything is based on appearance.”

Winters advises wine and spirits brands that want to stand out in the consumer marketplace to consider the bottle and label design as a kind of invitation. “What’s inside the bottle is a party, and I want as many people to come,” he said. 🍷