



TRADE TALK with... Levi Dalton



Levi Dalton came from humble beginnings, but his infatuation with the ever-evolving winemaking culture, and his drive to know all there is about wine, has made him into somewhat of a cult figure amongst sommeliers and many others in the wine community. He worked on the floor for well over a decade in top restaurants honing his skills and has visited many of the world's wine regions in order to take a deep dive into what it takes to make a good wine and the winemaker behind it. He left the hectic pace of service a few years ago and created the compelling and educational *"I'll Drink to That"* podcasts that have become a weekly mainstay of wine professionals from all facets of the industry. We hooked up with Levi recently to get some of his thoughts on wine and the direction it might be heading in and here is what he had to say.

Tell us a little bit about your background, what influenced you to get into the wine business, and how you decided to begin doing your podcasts. I worked as a sommelier for over 15 years. I got started with that because it was exciting. It was an entirely different world from what I knew. Then there were these 100 and 200-page wine lists on offer at busy restaurants, and those lists were completely packed with names I'd never heard of. There were bottles in the cellars that were passports to foreign countries. Like passports, wine bottles have a pretty uniform shape and design between them, but everything stamped on them indicates a different life experience, and I was attracted to that. I met wine people, who for instance, had just come back from Germany, or who knew these great restaurants in Burgundy. As a kid, a trip to the local mall would be a big deal for me and my family. I used to be taken to get new clothes twice a year at the nearest JC Penney, which was 40 minutes from our house. If we stopped and got brunch at McDonald's on the drive in, that was a treat. Wine wasn't a part of that life in any way, and that's why I was so drawn to it later. Also, I love the taste! So, I went for wine in a big way. I spent almost two decades working in restaurants, all in. I was on the floor at some of the most talked about and respected restaurants in the country. It was a thrill. There were all kinds of great moments. I could go on and on about all the amazing wine bottles that I opened along the way. Eventually you get older, and you want different things. When I was ready for a change, I figured that being a tech savvy media mogul couldn't really be that hard if other people were doing it (I'm thinking of David Geffen and the like here), so I went that route. It has been great. I'm at illdrinktothatpod.com if you are looking for me.

What do you see as the biggest challenge for today's young generation of Somms in creating a balanced list that gives credit to established, benchmark regions, as well as lesser known regions that deserve attention? It really has never been easier to make a list like you have described. Never. Restaurant sommeliers used to mostly be in the business of parroting magazines, doing Parker arbitrage, and selling brands. There were some people who didn't do that, but they were the exception, and it was difficult for them. Now there is so much more support from the distribution chain, and there is so much more awareness out there. Customers come in looking for different things now. For this reason,



I don't think it has ever been easier to design the kind of list that you are describing. The real challenges are the same as they have always been... as a sommelier, it's tough to do the hours, and balance all the different skill sets expected of you. A sommelier is supposed to possess management skills, buying skills, and an encyclopedic knowledge of wine. They're need to be able to manage supplier relations, social media skills, budgets, an infinite number of tastings, and of course, guest needs. Finally, they must have a knack for sales. Honestly, not a lot of people have all of those capabilities fully formed. It is a difficult job and the pay rate is declining.



2016 harvest in Santorini

You have visited many of the world's best wine regions and interviewed some of the world's top winemakers. Based on your experience, what trends do you see taking shape on the winemaking front in recent years and how do you see these trends affecting consumer preferences in the future? I think that a lot of people talk about Natural Wine at this point, but they make a mistake in talking about it like it is THE OTHER, as something so very different from the mainstream. In the actual winemaking world, what you see is that the great middle ground of producers is more often doing things like using native yeasts, racking less, preserving more CO₂, and using less sulphur. In other words, the quality conscious middle ground is shifting to embrace some of the key ideas and techniques of Natural Wine. That is the big shift, because famous appellations and sizable producers are involved. The conversation has shifted. It isn't an either/or situation in terms of the winemaking. In terms of consumer preferences, it has been clear for some time now that they are looking for fresher styles that are also more affordable and it's evident everywhere you look. Every piece of consumer data points in this direction.

You were one of the earlier fans of unknown, native Greek varieties and have visited Greece a number of times. What do you think are the most relevant challenges that Greek winemakers, and the industry as a whole, must confront in order to finally establish Greece as a category of its own on mainstream wine lists? It has to be about quality. That's number one... to get away from the bulk wine mentality. Primarily, that means more work in the vineyards. The next most important thing is to embrace what you



have, and not to go for international styles that are anyway fading in the market. If those two things happen, everything else will follow.

As a Somm working on the floor, how would you approach presenting a Greek wine to a customer who has never tried one... and what are some typical reactions once they do?

I didn't see a lot of customer resistance, frankly. People have been to Greece, they like Greece, and they have good memories of Greece. Customers are frequently willing to try a Greek wine that will match their occasion. I think the challenge in the market for Greek wine is really two-fold: the wine has to be memorable enough that customers will like it and want to buy another bottle, and before that, the sommeliers have to be familiar enough with the wines to stock them. Those are really the issues.

Assyrtiko, from Santorini, has become a standard on many mainstream lists that include Greek wine. What are some "other" Greek varieties and regions you think have the most potential for growth and should receive more focus in building awareness for the sector? There are so many, really. Crete has wonderful wine. The Peloponnese has wonderful wine. Naoussa has wonderful wine. But the challenge is that there is a wide divergence in the quality level between the best producers in those regions - those who are really doing the work- and some of the others. That's why I think that consumer awareness will probably be more focused around key producers, rather than on regions. Frankly, it is the same in most areas of the world. The superstar producers find prominence before the others in the region do. In a way, those superstars bring their regions along with them. People know about Pouilly-Fumé because they know about Dagueneau, for instance.

Which wine region do you think Greek winemakers should take note of and learn from that would be most relevant to advancing their cause, and why? Burgundy. If winemakers in Greece were to focus in on the vineyards like that, it would be a revolution.

Aside from your well-received, "I'll Drink to That" podcasts, can you tell us about any other new projects you are working on and some of your plans for the future? I have a little boy now. He is my newest project and also my happiest. In terms of my work life, I have been continuing to fine tune the I'll Drink to That! show, and I think the audience has noticed the effort.

Can you give us one of your favorite "over the top" food pairings with a Greek wine? Something that surprised me is how well a red wine can complement grilled octopus. An eye-opening moment was at a Santorini luncheon with the wonderful Caldera Red wine from Canava Roussos winery. That is an elegant red wine, very fragrant, and it was a knockout with a traditional octopus preparation. I also love it with a dish of the classic spaghetti of Santorini, made with the special volcanic tomatoes local to the island. Amazing.