

## WOMEN TO WATCH

## Grape Nut

**name:** Madeline Triffon

**born:** 1954

**who she is:** Master sommelier

**what distinguishes her:** In 1987, Triffon became one of two female master sommeliers in the world; she is the first American woman to achieve that status. Today, there are 35 master sommeliers in the country, five of whom are female.

**the exam:** The pass rate on the three-part master's exam is 10% to 20%; it includes blind wine-tasting (identifying six wines in a half-hour), oral theory (answering questions on wine, spirits and cigars of the world) and restaurant service. This exam is the only internationally recognized credential for beverage sales and service.

**what she does:** As director of wine for 13 Michigan restaurants, she's responsible for the wine lists, as well as all alcoholic beverages.

**her background:** Her stepfather was a Greek



naval officer, and she grew up in Greece and Italy. She studied theater at the University of Michigan, working her way through college by doing everything in the restaurant biz -- from washing dishes to bartending.

**how her job relates to theater:** "Theater teaches you grace under pressure, and this is a performance profession -- all improv! Going to a table, I have no idea who's there or if they want a dialogue."

**how she got where she is:** In 1977, she got a job as a wine steward at a French restaurant opened by the Westin Corporation in Detroit. Vaguely conversant about wine, she aced the interview because "I read the French wine list with a good accent." During her first two years on the floor -- reading Hugh Johnson's "World Atlas of Wine" was the beginning of her self-education -- guests often knew more than she.

**influences:** "Les Gruber [then owner of Detroit's legendary The London Chop House] influenced me to go for the master's sommelier diploma. He taught me if you couldn't do it right, don't do it."

**most rewarding part of her job:** "Working the floor on busy nights -- it's so relaxing, like swimming. There's also the whole performance aspect -- the immediacy of it."

**challenges:** "I'm an authority in an ever-changing field. You never rest on your laurels -- you're only as good as the last wine list you wrote or your last conversation with a guest."

**advice to aspiring wine gurus:** "You need high energy and excellent people skills. I work hard but can turn it off fast. I can relax on a dime -- you learn to or you age very quickly!"

*by Cindy Frenkel Kanter*

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