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THE WORLD OF FINE WINE



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It's been a long journey—or should that be voyage?—from communist Bulgaria to luxury residential ship *The World*. But it's been more than worth it for a career full of travel and extraordinary wine experiences

As a young girl in Bulgaria over four decades ago, I never imagined my life would take the course of one so immersed in global food and wine. I envisioned something quite different for myself, but I couldn't be more blessed that circumstances led me from behind the Iron Curtain to where I am today—beverage manager on *The World* mega-yacht, where I discover wines from around the globe and engage with winemakers as passionate about the product as I am.

Growing up in the small village of Krasen in Bulgaria during the communist regime, I had never heard of fine wine or the sommelier profession. But wine was certainly a part of my life, even as a child. I have vivid memories of sitting on my grandfather's lap dipping my fingers into his glass and savoring the flavor of the wine. It wasn't high in alcohol, and it was easy to drink. We consider wine to be "food" in Bulgaria! Most families still have their own small vineyards, where the production is often only one barrel a year—a tradition that survives to this day.

I never thought I'd leave Bulgaria because I was living under a communist government. I studied foreign languages, and my plan was to teach during the winter and then work in tourism over the summer, maybe as a front-office manager in a hotel near the Black Sea. But the plans we map out for ourselves often change due to circumstances beyond our control.

From Iron Curtain to Black Forest

The communist regime collapsed in 1989, two years before I graduated from the University of Economics in Varna, Bulgaria. The financial situation in my country was grave, and I had a difficult time making ends meet. I already had two daughters, so I applied for a hospitality job in Germany. At the time, there was a reciprocal arrangement between our two governments. Since I was fluent in German, I was offered a waitress position at the Schlosshotel Bühlerhöhe in the Black Forest, which was identified by the *Michelin Guide* as the top hotel in Germany for five consecutive years from 1992 to 1997.

It was quite a culture shock. Growing up, bananas and oranges were considered luxury items and given as gifts at Christmas. Here I was at the Schlosshotel Bühlerhöhe seeing an avocado for the first time at the age of 26! The hotel had a cheese room, with more than 200 cheeses featured throughout the year, and an amazing wine cellar. This was the first time I had seen a wine cellar suited to the long-term maturation of fine wine—or Michelin-star cuisine, for that matter.

I didn't feel at all qualified there. Although I was educated, I didn't possess any knowledge of fine dining, so I shared my anxieties with the hotel director. The restaurant manager assigned me to room service, because he knew I was fluent in German and thought this a good place for me to start.

I enjoyed my time in room service. My approach to dealing with the clientele, many of whom were celebrities, was quite genuine. Having lived behind the Iron Curtain for so long, I didn't even know who any of the celebrities were, and they seemed to appreciate that. It was interesting for us to meet and engage with one another.

I remained intrigued by fine dining, however, so I spent half of my first salary on books with which to educate myself in the area of food and wine. I still remember the first wine book I read—*Weine: Prüfen, Kennen, Geniessen* by Michael Broadbent MW. This was my first real foray into the art of tasting fine wine, and I was captivated. The hotel director realized that I was dedicated and hardworking. He also knew that the guests enjoyed my company, so he decided to train me for the main dining room. The experience also offered a glimpse into the world behind the hotel's one-Michelin-star restaurant, Imperial, and I fell completely in love with fine dining.

The more I read, the more I wanted to know about all aspects of food and wine, so I started researching courses. I used my savings from the three years working at the hotel to go to the renowned Deutsche Weinschule in Koblenz, Germany, and gain a sommelier education. The courses were intensive, because the school prepares you to run a wine cellar, and I was out of work for a year while studying. By the time I graduated with my sommelier diploma, my work permit had expired. I didn't know what to do with my new credentials. I had to return to

Photography courtesy of *The World*

Left: Marinela Ivanova serving Fleury Rosé Champagne over an ice sheet of frozen South Atlantic Ocean during *The World's* Antarctica Expedition in January 2016.

Bulgaria, but the country was still suffering as it tried to emerge post-communism, and I couldn't use my new education there.

It was a time in my life when I had to make some tough decisions. I had gone through a divorce, after which I was the only one supporting my family in Bulgaria, yet I was still so immensely driven by my passion for wine. I wanted to learn in such depth, meet knowledgeable people in the field, and absorb it all. I researched my professional options postgraduation, and the prospects were grim because, without a permit, I couldn't work in Western Europe. And I didn't want to go back to Bulgaria because there were no opportunities there. So, I found myself at a crossroads, and I decided to explore a career at sea.

From Seven Seas to *The World*

I had always been curious about other parts of the world, and books were the only source of information about what was happening outside of my small Bulgarian village. Communist laws prohibited travel, so everything beyond where I grew up was an imaginary world to me. The chance to work at sea was very appealing. I felt tempted by the possibilities.

My first experience at sea was on the MS *Berlin*, a popular and luxurious German cruise ship. I spent three and a half years as the head bar and wine stewardess, which opened up a whole new world for me. It was exciting and invigorating, and it reaffirmed to me that in life you can get more than you expect. Being at sea combined my desire to travel and my wish to explore different wine regions around the world.

After the *Berlin*, I moved to Regent Seven Seas Cruises. My goal was to seek employment with an American company and expand my horizons beyond Europe. Immersing myself in global cultures and improving my English were my chief objectives. I spent six years on Regent's 700-passenger *Mariner*, starting as the company's first female sommelier. After a year, I was named head sommelier, a position I held for five years. I was heavily involved in organizing themed "Spotlight on Wine" cruises for wine lovers, which was my introduction to working with local winemakers. I orchestrated large-scale winemaker dinners that kept me updated on wine trends and regions.

In 2008, I was contacted by a former Regent colleague, Arjan Scheepers, who was then food and beverage manager (he is now general manager) on *The World*, the largest privately owned residential yacht. He didn't believe the ship's wine program was up to the expectations of the residents, and he thought I would be able to elevate it to the required standard. I was intrigued by the opportunity and embraced it.

Bringing the destination alive

When I arrived on *The World*, there were 80 wines on the list. Now it has nearly 1,400, hand-picked from 18 countries, and a wine cellar holding between 14,000 and 17,000 bottles, depending on the destination. There is also a collection of more than 300 spirits, an extensive selection of sakes, and a contemporary cocktail program. My previous ship experience allowed me to develop global connections that I was able to tap into to expand *The World's* wine offerings.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my job is the ability to connect with people who make wine around the world. They are all amazingly different, and the engagement is inspiring. It is a privilege when I can welcome some of these winemakers on *The World* and introduce them to our residents. I don't seek out

producers who tailor to the mass market. I work closely with my colleague, head sommelier Mia Martensson, to seek out fine wines that clearly express their place of origin. If their authentic character is apparent, then this is a wine we consider featuring.

A sommelier on *The World* caters first and foremost to the needs of the residents and guests. My knowledge becomes a bridge by which I hope to explain—not lecture—about wine selection, and as a result the residents trust my judgment. My role on *The World* is unique, because the ship is in a class of its own. I am not bound to a single region or local supplier. I don't have a set list to follow, so my team and I have the flexibility to purchase whatever wine and spirits we choose. What we purchase is constantly changing to reflect our current or next destination. Since we are continuously traveling the globe, we are able to curate a diverse and unrivaled selection.

The dynamic of the relationship I have with the residents is very precious to me and makes my job far more personally enriching. I know most of the residents well. We live together. I see them night after night after night. Knowing their preferences means I can keep specific residents in mind as I make local wine purchases. The trust they've developed in my expertise has fostered a wonderful intimacy as we discuss wine production, wine pairings, and all aspects of the subject. I've even had residents who were dining shoreside call me on the ship to ask for my advice about wine purchases. I feel touched by their confidence, and this trust relates to one of the most valuable lessons I've learned as a sommelier: people respond to people.

On *The World*, our mission is "to bring the destination alive" for residents and guests as they journey around the planet. We introduce the residents to wines of a certain region as the ship is en route to a particular area. My beverage team works closely with our creative chefs, who love exploring local produce and push flavor boundaries as they craft outstanding menus. In advance of meals, we experiment with wines to ensure the right pairing, and if necessary, we request that chefs tweak certain flavors. When coordinating special winemaker dinners, we've asked chefs to prepare certain dishes to match specific wines. The collaborative atmosphere is energizing.

The ship has multiple restaurants with culinary menus that change several times a month, so our beverage team focuses a lot on designing the ideal food/wine combination to elevate tastes. Some might consider this a challenge, but I thrive on the opportunity it affords me to build my wealth of experience and expertise. When I first came onboard, I needed to educate myself on sakes to build a sake selection for the ship's Asian-fusion restaurant. I welcomed the chance to research and expand my knowledge base. We now feature 44 different sakes, many of which we selected during our most recent visit to Japan.

Organizing exclusive visits for resident wine lovers to iconic wine producers that are often closed to the public proves to be as educational and inspiring for them as it is for me. It's about those authentic, bespoke, one-of-a-kind experiences, such as when the owners or winemakers personally welcome us, sometimes in their home.

Residents are particularly intrigued when they can connect with the people who run the land. It's the winemaker's story they often want to discover. When we were in Barcelona once, we visited a leading small Cava producer, Raventós i Blanc. Our residents were particularly captivated by a humble vineyard

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worker who spoke in broken English. He had spent 25 years working at the winery and knew every aspect of it inside and out. He was tending to the wines like they were his babies. He was rich in stories and experiences, and exploring them was so rewarding for the residents. We've also had dinner at Château Margaux, visited Torbreck Wines in Barossa Valley, Antinori's Guado al Tasso estate in Tuscany, Graham's Quinta dos Malvedos in the Upper Douro... The list goes on and on. Most recently we left the ship in the port of Valparaiso on a four-day trip to explore the wine lands of Chile.

Being a sommelier on *The World* has been the highlight of my career. We do face the occasional logistical challenge, such as receiving supplies in remote parts of the world, but I've been given the freedom to curate a unique floating wine cellar for a group of individuals who share my passion for fine wine. I make sure to create a selection of wines that excites our residents and takes them on an exploration, while at the same time ensuring that their individual favorite wines are always available. Sourcing local wines depending on our itinerary is crucial, too, as it is one of the best ways to bring the destinations alive, even before we reach them.

What sommeliers and wine are for

In my continuous pursuit of knowledge, I am currently studying for the Wine & Spirit Education Trust diploma at the Wine Academy of Rust, Austria, and hope to graduate next year. Going back to school to explore new wine-production processes and vineyards keeps me fresh and up to date with the latest trends and innovations of my craft. It also reaffirms to me that my career choice was the right one, even if I have never doubted it.

I am often asked about my favorite wines, which is a tough question to answer. If I have to declare favorites, Mosel Riesling, red Burgundy, and anything from Bordeaux would probably top my list. But I enjoy every wine that is well crafted and represents its terroir, no matter where in the world it might come from: Australian Shiraz, Argentine Malbec, Barolo, Rioja... And it's certainly not only the classics that count: I also love learning about emerging regions and wines. When we call into countries like China, India, or Mexico, we still explore the wine scene

equally enthusiastically and try to introduce the best producers to our residents and guests.

During my time on *The World*, I've been privileged to meet two wine professionals in particular whom I revere. About two years ago, Jancis Robinson MW OBE came onboard as the guest of a resident, and I was in awe. I broke my professional etiquette—something I never thought I would do—and asked her for an autograph. She was extremely gracious. I admire her integrity, her contribution to our craft, and her wine opinions. To me, her books represent the foundation of wine education today. They are overflowing with knowledge and are used by so many professionals. Engaging with her in person was enlightening. Another special moment came several years ago when I was introduced to Michael Broadbent MW, who was invited onboard by one of our residents for a 2000 Bordeaux dinner. I was so heartened, because his was the first book I ever read on wine and a source of inspiration at the beginning of my career.

Another person I deeply admire but haven't yet had the chance to meet is Gerard Basset MS MW OBE, a former World Champion Sommelier. His professional achievements and qualifications are second to none—but my admiration stems most from his dedication to our profession. Few Master Sommeliers stay in the field. Many become teachers or writers, but Gerard remains in his hotel and restaurant, TerraVina, and continues to serve his customers. That aligns very much with my philosophy about a sommelier's place being in a restaurant and the importance of a genuinely warm and welcoming approach to customers, so he or she can educate rather than dictate or intimidate. That is why the hospitality industry has served me so well.

When I reflect on where I started—never imagining that I would leave Bulgaria and embark on a lifetime of wine discovery—and where I am today, literally traveling the world, I find it heartening to think where passion, perseverance, and some luck can lead you. When the ship was docked in Cape Town, South Africa, in March 2015, I was asked by Nikki Munro from Pinotage Youth Development Academy to share my story and give a motivational speech at the school to their students (all above the age of 18). The academy is dedicated to educating young, disadvantaged South Africans who, for one reason or another, couldn't graduate from high school and to preparing them for employment in the wine industry and related sectors, such as hospitality and tourism. I invited them onboard to tour our wine cellar, and they loved it. It was very moving for me to have those kids absorb the entire experience and ask so many questions. I admired their spark, their determination never to give up, and their unshakable belief in endless possibilities.

Over the next decade, I hope still to be journeying on *The World*, exploring the world's wine regions, connecting with like-minded individuals in the wine industry, and sharing my love of fine wine with our residents. And when given the opportunity, I hope to continue influencing a culture of wine appreciation. Wine is still considered by many people as an elite, obscurantist product or a luxury status symbol, in either case for the privileged few. I would like to convince as many people as possible not to purchase wine merely as a financial investment, no matter how iconic or profitable it may. Rather, we should purchase wine for the extraordinary pleasure we get when we drink it—that's what it's for and what it should all be about. ■