

# First “Blacks in Wine Symposium” Gives Small Business Owners Tips and Solutions

*Some 30 industry members from around the country attended the Virginia meeting.*

BY LAYLA SCHLACK



*Photo by Alicia Seay*

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The “Blacks in Wine Symposium” drew some 30 industry people from across the nation to Richmond, Virginia, to talk about the challenges that African Americans face in the wine and spirits trade.

The event was organized by Benita Johnson, a member of the Guild of Sommeliers, founder of [The Vine Wine Club](#) and a booster of wine in general. She hopes that the symposium will become an annual event.

Johnson said that the symposium “started with a Facebook group.” She is also the creator of the [Exclusive Blacklist](#), a weekend-long series of wine-and-food events celebrating African-American winemakers and chefs in the area, now in its fourth year.

Virginia’s Secretary of [Agriculture and Forestry](#), Bettina Ring, opened the symposium by noting the state is the nation’s fifth largest wine producing state, “but I’m hoping one day we’ll be up there with California, at number one or two.”

The morning panel featured Regine Rousseau, founder of the Chicago-based [Shall We Wine](#), which, for the last 20 years has been conducting in-store tastings and corporate events. She was joined by Delaware importer [Lawrence Boone](#) and André Hueston Mack of Oregon winery [Maison Noir Wines](#). Rounding out the panel was Edward Lee “Mac” McDonald of Sonoma’s [Vision Cellars](#).

With the relatively small crowd, audience members were able to ask targeted questions about their businesses which ranged from in-home tastings and tours to winemaking.

While some questions dealt with how to engage African-American markets, most were concerns universal to small business. The experts were able to offer advice and resources on how to create a niche brand and identify and engage its target audience.

There was a discussion on the merits of owning a vineyard vs. buying grapes. McDonald discussed specific per-acre costs of planting a vineyard—which he estimated at \$30,000-to-\$40,000 in Virginia all the way up to \$100,000 in Sonoma. Mack spoke about how to ensure quality when buying grapes from other growers.

Afternoon panels were shorter and less formal and included Glenn Murray, founder of Chicago-based [Wine Crawl](#), and Sukari Bowman, host of the [The Color of Wine](#) podcast.



### ***About the Author***

**LAYLA SCHLACK**

**@laylaschlack**

*Senior Editor*

Schlack has written and edited stories about cooking, dining, spirits, entertaining and travel, as well as developed recipes, in various editorial roles at *Fine Cooking* and *Hemispheres*. Her writing has won a NATJA award. When she's not editing *Wine Enthusiast's* food, spirits and entertaining stories, she can usually be found clanging around her Connecticut kitchen, beverage in hand, trying to re-create some tasty meal she's had over the course of her travels.

**Email: [lschlack@wineenthusiast.net](mailto:lschlack@wineenthusiast.net)**

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