

Femme Vitale - Shari Darling: A Passionate Palate, A Coachable Mind - Summer 09

Contributed by Charmian Christie

A writer becomes a food and wine expert by being ever willing to learn.

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Despite a syndicated wine column and six books to her name, Shari Darling refuses to call herself an expert. "I like to think of myself as a novice--an experienced novice," she says. "It doesn't matter how long you've been in your trade or craft or industry, you have to approach it as if it's the first time."

When Darling took her first full-time writing job, the only position available was covering sports. Although she knew nothing about wine, except that she loved it, her enthusiasm for the grape was so infectious she convinced her editor to let her write the odd wine article. But during her interview with the president of Inniskillin Wines she mispronounced pinot noir so badly he asked, "You're not really a wine writer are you?" Undaunted, Darling replied, "No, but I want to be!"

Instead of ending the interview, he arranged for Darling to be mentored by Inniskillin's Deborah Pratt. For a year, Darling wrote wine articles and sent them to Pratt for critiquing. "She would edit it and teach me about what I did right, what I did wrong," Darling says. "She was instrumental in supporting me to become a wine writer."

Grateful for this rare coaching opportunity, Darling knew this one-on-one feedback wouldn't be enough for the wine world, so she trained as a sommelier at Toronto's George Brown College under Jacques Marie. Always a stand-out, Darling not only got her certification, she and CBC's Konrad Ejbich helped Marie write *The Wine Manual*, a definitive text that is used in colleges and universities for sommelier training.

Despite co-authoring a wine book with two of the biggest names in oenology, Darling was still seen as a woman in a male-dominated field. More than once she was told to forget about wine and focus on food. Instead of balking at the sexist advice, Darling saw an opportunity. "I realized wine writers didn't know about food, and food writers didn't know about wine. So I carved out my own niche in pairing."

Since then, her column, *The Sophisticated Wino*, has become syndicated and she's written five more wine books. Her most recent books *Harmony on the Palate* (Whitecap Books, 2005) and *Orgasmic Appetizers* (Whitecap Books, 2008) focus on pairing. While they provide delicious recipes, the science of taste and how food and wine can either work together or against each other are key.

While many writers report on the merits of a region, grape variety, or vintage, Darling thinks these factors are less important than knowing your own palate, and her books help you do just that. Whether you're a non-taster, super-taster or medium-taster has as much affect on your enjoyment as the wine's quality. "Know your tastes and you can explore the world without the hit and miss approach and wasting your money."

Never one to be swayed by the snob-factor of wine, Darling believes wine labels are misleading. "They describe flavours and are the interpretation of the person who wrote the label. You might get peach, the next person might not."

Calling wine labels "subjective," Darling knows their carefully worded descriptions can induce as much anxiety as pleasure. "Don't worry if you don't taste what the label says. It changes with what you eat. But what doesn't alter are the styles, the taste sensations. Smooth, sour, sweet--they never alter." With these immutable factors in mind, Darling pairs by taste sensations not flavour, and this is something anyone can learn.

While Darling doesn't rely on expert opinions when it comes to wine ratings, she is always open to suggestions for growth and improvement. "Anybody can have a coach," she says. "Your greatness isn't achieved by having a coach, but by being coachable."

This openness led to her own brand of dry rubs, *Orgasmic Culinary Creations*. Had she not listened to her clients, this line might never have evolved. Having developed her first rub, Sweet Jerk, for corporate events, she never considered anyone would want to buy it. When people asked if it was for sale, she'd turn them away saying it was made just for events. But one day, a woman wouldn't take no for an answer and asked if she could buy a bag right then and there. The woman's insistence made Darling realize this could be her next business move.

When Darling took the rub to the distributor who handled her wine meals, she got coached again. Understanding the market, the distributor insisted Darling develop a whole line and pushed until she'd developed four versions. Within a

year, Sweet Jerk, Cajun Quickie, Tickle My Ribs and French Kiss were available at wine and specialty shops, each with a sassy, sexy name and designed to pair with specific types of wine.

Again, Darling succeeded because she was coachable. Being a non-taster who loves lots of salt and a "whole bulb of garlic in my spaghetti sauce," Darling knew her taste preferences would be too strong for 75% of her clients. So, she turned to her super-taster friend who wasn't afraid to say when a rub was overpowering or too salty.

With her rubs now available online and selling well, what's next? "I'm working on sauces and savory biscotti mix for the wine lover. Orange and poppy seed, Parmesan and rosemary--again the label will suggest wine pairing." If her new products are as delicious as her rubs, Darling's biggest challenge will be deciding what pairs with sweet success. Click the links below to buy Shari Darling's books from McNally Robinson now!

[Harmony on the Palate](#)

[Orgasmic Appetizers](#)