

Wine & Spirits

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Shelley Lindgren

Italian wines, particularly those from the south, are creatures of context. That's what Shelley Lindgren realized as she was working to finalize the concept for *A16*, the popular Italian restaurant in San Francisco where she's a partner. Originally the idea was to open a Neapolitan pizzeria and wine bar, so Lindgren found herself in Campania for research. At the suggestion of a sommelier in Naples, she tried a Taurasi from Antonio Caggiano. Her eyes were suddenly opened to the world of southern Italy, and she began to narrow the focus at *A16* to southern Italian wine. After the experience in Naples, she recalls, "We sought out everything from the region that we could find."

The challenge, though, was how to present the highly regional and relatively obscure wines of southern Italy to diners. In the US, the wines of the south, when they can be found at a restaurant, are often relegated to a "South & Islands" page on the wine list. At *A16*, which opened in 2004, Lindgren decided to build the restaurant around the wine program as much as the wood-fired pizza oven. And in the process, she has changed people's impressions of southern Italian wines. She treats the wines like fine Burgundies, serving them in elegant stemware and listing them regionally in an impressively bound book. And she set out to keep her staff as informed on the wines as she is herself.

"We put a huge emphasis on service to help introduce these wines to diners," she says. The combination of traditional southern Italian cuisine with knowledgeable and thorough wine service quickly convinced San Francisco diners to move beyond sangiovese and pinot grigio, and to embrace aglianico, fiano and nero d'avola.

A wave swelled through San Francisco's wine community, many of whom began to frequent the wine bar at *A16* (Meatball Mondays at the restaurant are one of the city's great unofficial industry nights). As Lindgren and her team began to grow their business—



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the Roman-themed *SPQR* opened in 2007; a restaurant centered around the cuisine of the Marche region is slated for later this year—a number of her sommeliers have come into their own as local authorities on southern Italian wine, including Andrew Mosblech, Kevin Wardell and Ehren Jennings. Wardell, who can often be found working the floor at *A16*, recently traveled around the Marche, while Mosblech, an *A16* veteran, has begun working for an importer of Italian wine with a strong southern portfolio. Jennings worked for a few years at the long-running wine bar and restaurant, *Bazar*, before joining Lindgren's team as sommelier at *SPQR*.

Perhaps the most telling sign of Lindgren's influence has come from southern Italy's winemakers themselves. People who have never paid a market visit to the US (nor Milan, for that matter) now make regular visits to *A16*. "It's an amazing restaurant, better than many in Naples," said Enrico Di Giulio of Borgo di Colloredo in Molise, after a recent winemaker dinner. "It was like I was still at home."

—WOLFGANG M. WEBER