

Male-Dominated Liquor Industry Gets A Shot Of Female Expertise

By Gary Stoller, *ForbesLife* | Published March 18, 2021

As the nation celebrates Women's History Month, it's an appropriate time to tip the cap to the increasing number of women who are entering and making an impact in the male-dominated alcoholic beverages industry.

Pioneering female vintners and brewers worldwide have made their marks for decades, using their smarts and talents to bring their beverages to the masses. But their contributions are not always recognized.

"Women have always played an important role in farming and wine, but often their contributions were not acknowledged," says Laura Catena, a physician and biologist who is the owner of two Argentine wineries, **Luca** and **La Posta**.

In 1995, Catena founded the Catena Institute of Wine, which today collaborates with the University of California Davis and an Argentine university to advance and promote wine knowledge. The institute aims to make Argentine wines some of the world's best and keep Argentina's winemaking regions thriving for another 100 years.

"Making great wine in the Mendoza region requires a great deal of local knowledge and research," says Catena, whose Luca Malbec has twice been in the Wine Spectator Top 100. "We believe in our region above our own individual winery, because, without our region, its people and the ecosystem behind each vineyard, we have nothing."



Another Argentine winemaker, Jimena Lopez, makes wine for **Bodini** and owns the **Graffito** brand. She teaches her craft at a university and has been in the winemaking industry since 1993 when she was required by her technical high school to work in a winery for six months.

"While I was there, surrounded by trucks full of grapes, the presses, filters and bottling lines were working, and I fell in love with that world," Lopez recalls. "I decided I was going to study winemaking at the university, and, the following year, I got my first job in that winery as a lab assistant. I remember the first day on a bus, looking at the sunshine, all excited and incredibly happy. I knew it was going to be the beginning of an incredible journey, and I was right."

Anabelle Sielecki founded **Mendel Wines** with her brothers in Mendoza in 2003 and is quite aware that men have dominated the Argentine wine industry.

"Like so many other industries, having diverse leadership can help shake up perspectives and lead to broader innovation," says Sielecki, whose niece Tati is taking over the winery's leadership role. "There is definitely a sense of sorority among the women in the wine industry, and we are thrilled to see the ranks swelling."



The ranks are also increasing in the craft beer industry where 23% of owners are women, according to a 2019 study by the Brewers Association trade group. However, many of the female owners are half of husband-wife teams, and only 2% of breweries are exclusively owned by women. That's quite a contrast to 52% of breweries that are owned exclusively by men.

The sake industry also has very few female owners, says Miho Imada, the owner of Imada Shuzō, which brews **Fukucho** sake and is based in Hiroshima, Japan. Imada began working for her family's sake business in 1994, became a toji, or master brewer, in 2000 and doesn't dwell on her womanhood.

"It's honestly not something that I think about very often," she says. "The inspiration to make sake comes from a desire to create sake that reflects my region and continues to improve every year. There aren't many women in this field, so rather than getting caught up in challenges of being a woman, I'm just trying to move forward and make the best sake I can."

Imada's achievements are numerous, including earning a university law degree before entering the world of sake.

"I am very active in new innovation in sake brewing," she says. "I work with rice-polishing machine companies to create different ways to polish rice to create more purity in sake and use white koji in sake making, which is still quite rare and brings out different levels of acidity in sake. One of my proudest accomplishments is reviving a nearly forgotten heirloom rice that had been out of use for over 100 years and learning how to make great sake from it."

Miho Fujita, the president of Mioya Brewery, which brews **Yuho** sake in Ishikawa, Japan, was working as an executive of a Tokyo toy company and had no sake experience when she entered the industry. At that time, though, she says she was interested in working "to create something from scratch" and getting a chance to be creative.

"In 2003, my uncle, who was working as vice president of Mioya Brewery, passed away, and there was no one else in the family to take over the business," Fujita says. "So, I decided to move from Tokyo to Ishikawa to run the company."

Today, Fujita says the number of Japanese women in the workplace is increasing, and she tries to hire women for positions in her company. Women, she says, work very hard to prove themselves in the sake industry.

"My story of becoming a sake brewery owner is very unique — a single woman from Tokyo who moved to the countryside and entered an industry I was completely unfamiliar with," Fujita says. "I hope my story gives other women confidence to pursue their dreams, even if they feel they may not have all the necessary qualifications."



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