



Wine Seminars Uncork Collaboration and Cooperation

The success of Watson's seminars are highly dependent on the group she is working with and their ability to interact with their senses and one another. **By Stef Schwalb**

Located in Northern Virginia, The National Conference Center in Leesburg is one of the country's largest and most comprehensive conference centers and

training facilities. It is also the only one of its kind to employ a chief wine officer.

With more than 30 years of experience in the wine industry, Mary

Watson has worked as a retail consultant, salesperson and the spokesperson for Virginia Wine Tourism in 2007 and 2008. She is also a Certified Sommelier, a Certified Specialist of Wine and has been a judge for the Virginia Wine Growers Association for more than 20 years. At The National, Watson performs a range of wine programs and seminars for clients, works in tandem with the executive chef pairing wines for monthly Chef's Tables and is an integral part of the food and beverage program. She also manages The Black Olive Bar & Grill onsite and creates the herb garden.

Watson has developed 10 wine and beer seminars that can be used as team-building exercises or teaching modules, including: Wine Aroma Identification, Blind Tasting, Semi-Blind Tasting, Herb and Wine Tasting, Chocolate and Wine Tasting, Cheese and Wine Pairing, Food & Wine Pairing Basics, Wine Blending Seminar, Wine Components Tasting and Beer & Food Tasting. She also is open to anything else that interests her clients. "I'll do exercises that involve beer," she

explains. "For example, if you like this beer, drink this wine ... or vice versa. I call what I do 'wine-fountainment,' but it is more than that since I can incorporate beer, scotch, bourbon and more."

Watson has been with The National since 2014 when LaKota Hotels and Resorts took over the property. "I worked for Benchmark Hospitality at Lansdowne Resort when I first started this program," she says. "It was an alternative activity to golfing or tennis. I started a series of food and wine camps and used some of these activities as part of the weekend. Not long afterwards, we began to offer them as team-building exercises or tasting seminars."

After Watson left Lansdowne to become a corporate sommelier, she offered these programs to other properties in the Benchmark portfolio. She came to The National by way of a "who-you-know" coincidence. "The owner of Lakota Hotels and Resorts was my former COO during my days with Benchmark," Watson says. "He called me up and told me he had a project for me, and the rest is history."

Watson has been at The

National for more than three years. "One of the biggest and best parts of the new program is our series of Chef's Table dinners, which we offer to the public and as sales tools," she says. "I have been lucky to work with some terrific chefs. We also have implemented a membership club through our bar and offer monthly, themed wine tastings. For instance, we just tasted through Spain and then Virginia, since October is Virginia Wine Month."

The success of Watson's seminars are highly dependent on the group she is working with and their ability to interact with their senses and one another. The experience tends to mentally and physically put participants at ease, which is a definite bonus. "There aren't many team-building exercises that incorporate alcohol, so that is a big plus in the enjoyment factor and takes it out of the range of the usual exercises," she says. "For example, picture this: Depending on the size of the group, participants are divided into teams like most other team-building exercises.

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Each team is given 10-12 aromas (all found in wine) and then work as a team to identify them. Once this is done, we taste (and smell) four to six different wines as an illustration of a particular aroma. Most wines will encompass several different aromas that were identified. For instance, vanilla is a common aroma that I use because it best identifies the use of oak in the winemaking process. Another example is the semi-blind tasting. I write descriptions for eight to 10 different wines. Once the teams have been established, they are given six wines to taste and pair up with the correct description."

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are not demographic-specific, they attract a broad range of organizations. "I like to think it is the forward-thinking clients that are the most interested, but I can never quite characterize any of them," Watson says. "I think most of them are looking for an activity that is fun and informative and different from what they are listening to in their meetings and/or training programs all day.

"My goal is to be informative and entertaining. It is sort of like any activity — if you don't have their attention, it doesn't matter much what you say."

She does find the blending seminar appeals more to millennials. "Not only do they make a Meritage-type wine of their own," Watson says, "they also work up a label for the wine, pick a creative name and a sales pitch to promote it."

Overall, wine seminars at The National have proven popular and a far cry from what employees usually experience (or endure) during typical, traditional team-building exercises.

"I have only had positive reactions to all of the tastings/seminars/team-building so far," Watson says. "It is a break for the participants, and most of the time they learn more about their own taste and about wine in general. While I don't know if it brings them any closer, I do think they certainly learn more about each other."

Watson has had several repeat clients who have brought different participants in for subsequent stays at The National. For her, attendee interaction is a driving force behind a seminar's success and her own enjoyment of the experience. "I like to see participants who are eager to learn and get into the mood of the exercise," she says. "Every seminar/tasting/team-building needs something or someone to break the ice.

"Wine/alcohol usually does that nicely, but it's a lot easier and more fun if there is some enthusiasm from the participants from the beginning. I like questions. They're a good indicator of the attention and interest of the group or individuals." **WPM**