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**The Sonoma Table, June 2023**

1 message

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## *The Sonoma Table*

### **Hello, Summer!**



Summer Solstice is the longest day of sun during the year and officially kicks off summer. The day has meant many things through time, like pagans dancing around bonfires all night in celebration of Midsummer's Eve. The basic tradition revolves around fire, music, friends, good food and reflection.

In France June 21st is the official *Nuit de la Musique* - or *Night of Music* - and it's a magical day and evening where shuttered streets have bands playing throughout each city, people line the cafes and bars, and, of course, there is dancing. I loved living in the south of France on this day when you could wander around town finding just about any and every style of music, much of it traditional, and there was no curfew, no bedtime, and, being France, most people took the following day off from work.

While the Solstice does not constitute an official holiday, many people take the day for a time of gratitude and reflection, meditation and gathering. If you haven't already, invite

over friends, neighbors and even your fellow Dames, open a bottle of bubbles and share why you are grateful. Then together enjoy a dinner of locally-raised meats and vegetables while you drink more wine and stay outdoors late, just because you can!

And at some point during this long day, take time to reflect upon what it means for you to be a Dame, our great achievements to date and all the opportunity we have ahead of us. We are grateful for you all!

—Written by Dame Barbara Barrielle

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## **Overcoming Diversity: Fight the Fight** *A Conversation with Dame Lise Asimont*

Scientist, farmer, winemaker, parent, and wine industry unicorn - Lise Asimont conquered and climbed a formidable career path. Showcasing her trademark pairing of regal pragmatism and charismatic poetry, my conversation with Lise offers a glimpse of what it really takes to survive with one's ambition sated and humanity intact in a world neither designed nor eager to accommodate the presence of powerful women.

Let's hear her story.

—Written by Dame Maisie Lyman



**Maisie (ML):** You have a very ambitious background that moved your career path around a bit and you've been successful in a wine world famed for its lack of diversity. Over the course of that experience from your vantage point, what do you think is the best lesson you've learned?

**Lise (LA):** Oh, I'm in this space now. I'm almost 47, and had the tools to come to this conclusion earlier but just didn't have the mental space until my babies left home. So when they left it was my chance to have perspective of where things are going. And what I've learned and am ready to really embrace is that the grass is not greener.

**ML:** Interesting proverb that one since it often runs both ways. How did you come to change sides?

**LA:** I had a pretty awesome trajectory in my career. But it felt like everything I did, I had to fight. Win the fight and they'd say "oh it's so great, you're a female viticulturist." [Rage Against the Machine](#) would play in my mind, and I never said it but I thought "thank you, male viticulturist." And I was so so grateful to get into this game.

**ML:** Gratitude in the midst of that frustration - what was your path there?

**LA:** I got my start as a grower rep for Geyser Peak Winery. My mentor, Daryl Groom, hand picked me for the role. I felt truly seen by him. So naturally, instead of being seen, I morphed into everyone around me. Dressed, spoke, drove the car of an industry white guy for 6 years. Little pay raises, little promotions while people in similar positions leap frogged me. My UC Davis Master's degree was getting bypassed for the boys' club with a JC Degree. I worked my ass off just to get my token Asian, Filipina foot in the door with these guys. And they were always guys and they were always white.

**ML:** How did you manage to justify that fight when it wasn't paying off?

**LA:** I never wanted to draw a lot of attention to that effort so I kept the battle private and kept a facade of being "one of the guys." Then I had my daughter. Her future brought my present into focus. I'm a brown woman. I have to be a brown woman. Interestingly, at that time while I was upset, I wanted to leave Geyser Peak. Cause it's gotta be better, greener over there.

Over there is Coppola and it turbocharges my career. Manager to director, the first woman of color to ascend so high in my industry in the state of California. It was crazy. Everyone knew me - I was a unicorn. Coppola's philosophy of art first, then production gave me space to figure out who I wanted to be, my style. I was liberated from the bro-dom of "here are the climatic patterns of the growing season."

For twelve and a half years I chased the VP role at Coppola. My husband would point out the "underpaid, underappreciated" lack of reciprocity. I'd grown this brand in a way rarely seen in the wine industry. My ego, my personhood was wrapped up in THIS career, THIS title, THIS brand.

**ML:** How do you untangle your worth from being so entrenched, so mired in your labor?

**LA:** I admitted I was miserable. Angry, jaded, I really should have left years before I did. I was the thing holding me back. Not the job. Not the white guys. Me. And I did what I always did - I jumped for greener grass. I was angry, I knew I was better than all of the wine world and I was gonna change the world... through tech.

It was wild leap to a tech company. Crazy. Ridiculous. At least it served agriculture and viticulture. I aged weeks in a day. We were all apparently jaded and angry and trying to make the world a better place through tech. It was not a collaborative space, we were all crab mentality and fighting each other. As cool as it was, I looked around and just couldn't do it anymore.

Then, serendipity, I was offered my dream job at a dream winery and took it. Worst time of my life. I learned a lot in that year. Most importantly, I found confidence and comfort in having some absolutes for my career. Those absolutes made my "the grass is greener disease" suddenly very obvious.

**ML:** What are your absolutes?

**LA:** So my absolutes are: you have to be absolutely sustainable in your farming practices for me to do well in your company. And you need to allow me to fix it if I see that there are issues. I need to be empowered in all aspects of the sustainability triad: people, profit, and ecology - and I excel at the ecology part and I'm passionate about regenerative agriculture, so I can see when the ecological part of sustainability is going wrong.

**ML:** So you have your greener grass disease and your absolutes, and they're the problem and the solution simultaneously. What's that clarity like?

**LA:** The greatest job of my life happens. And I was able to see it. My role as a farm manager for Prudential was honestly the happiest job I've had in my life. In 18 months, I picked up a decade of information. I loved it and I was the only person who could do it. I have this business brain, and the science brain, and I'm a farmer. It was a formative moment. I woke up to make sure the institutional funds invested in vineyards were attended to. I worked to ensure that the plumbers and teachers of various counties in multiple states could retire on time and enjoy their grandchildren. There's nothing more motivating.

**ML:** Motivating and very wholesome. What brought you back to the private sector?

**LA:** At that moment I get picked up by Foley, cause one of my "ride or die" goes there and I have to go with him. He's too good not to work for. And I love it. I love it. But Foley is very stressful. Very cut-throat. You have a limited number of years you can pull off for Foley and I know that. And I am loving every second of it.

**ML:** And the grass-colored-glasses?

**LA:** What I've learned through all of this is that the grass is not greener. It's your perspective and your response that needs to change. When I feel trapped, unseen, or undervalued, then I change my perspective and allow that to drive my response. You can't be rigid, it's a trap.

**ML:** Stoic and ebullient, nice balance. What does it mean to persevere to this point of clarity? Is the journey necessary or do you have some thoughts that carry over to other experiences, points of view, or different paths?

**LA:** It's grit. The intersection of luck and adaptation. It's finding your people. My mentors and the people who helped me along the way, they've shifted and changed, taken space to be a fan from afar and later returned with their support when I was in a space they could really get behind. Nobody respects me more than they did before. As a woman of color it's by a power of 3 harder for me to get things done and noticed.

**ML:** That intersection of herculean effort and enhanced skillset, is it a burden, is it a super power?

**LA:** The burden is that the chessboard is rigged. The superpower is assessing in real time the nature and the scale of the imbalance and responding accordingly. The superpower is surviving the exhaustion of that effort. The subtext, the need to read a room and assess the power dynamic while responding in order to influence without being overt. The burden is that I have to do it. The burden is most of us do. The superpower is that I, and many of us, have a catalog of skills that aren't necessary for most white guys to have and thus I have a different edge all the time.

**WAY TO GO, LISE!**

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# Upcoming Events & Reminders

July 13th: Julia's Table 5pm-7pm, Farmer's Wife, Sebastopol

July 18th: Member Meeting, 4:30pm Farm Tour/5pm Meeting, Dry Creek Peach, Healdsburg

July 20th: SF Chapter Fundraiser - An Evening of Tequila & Tacos with Dame Joanne Weir 6pm, San Francisco

July 31st: Tour of Kathleen Thompson Hill Kitchen Memories Collection at Elizabeth Spencer Winery, 11-2pm. Stay tuned for ticket details!



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*"I believe in red meat. I've often said: red meat and gin."* --Julia Child

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