

# BEST USA SOMMELIER ASSOCIATION

Semi-Finalist List  
May 5th, 2021

Bios	
	<b>Andres Blanco (Houston, TX)</b>
	<b>Angela Demmel (Continuum Estate, Napa, CA)</b>
	<b>Brandon Kerne (Houston, TX)</b>
	<b>Brendan Lawson (Ontario, CA)</b>
	<b>Christopher Chan (Seattle, WA)</b>
	<p><b>Christopher Rogers (Tavernetta, Denver, CO)</b> Chris Rogers has been in the restaurant industry since he was in high school in Amarillo, TX. His studies eventually took him to Greeley, CO where he earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Opera Performance at the University of Northern Colorado. During his time in graduate school, Chris began to fall in love with wine. After graduating in 2014, Chris decided to leave the opera world to pursue wine wholeheartedly. He began his wine career by working at Frasca Food &amp; Wine in Boulder, CO, after passing his CMS Certified exam in 2015. After two years of working his way up the ladder at Frasca, Chris then became the Wine Director of Black Cat, Farm-to-Table Bistro in Boulder. Chris continued to leave his mark on the Denver/Boulder wine scene, directing beverage programs at The Brown Palace Hotel, and Safta. In 2019 Chris returned to the Frasca Hospitality Group, where he became a sommelier for the group's newest restaurant, a European-style wine bar, Sunday Vinyl. During his tenure, Chris passed the WSET III exam in November 2019, and the CMS Advanced Exam in March 2020. Chris is currently working for the Frasca Hospitality Group at their Denver restaurant, Tavernetta, where he took over as Lead Sommelier in February 2021. Chris continues to strive for growth within the world of wine and is currently hoping to sit for the CMS Master Sommelier Exam in 2022.</p>
	<b>David Bérubé (Restaurant Daniel, NYC)</b>
	<p><b>David Hunter (Tavern on Kruse, Portland OR)</b> David Hunter is a Sommelier and Wine Director in the Portland metro area. Throughout his experience in fine dining, he quickly fell in love with wine through the lense of food and wine pairings and hasn't looked back since. Since joining the Court of Master Sommeliers in 2017, he has worked with multiple Michelin starred establishments and some of the highest awarded wine programs in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2020, he was a West Coast Regional finalist for the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs young sommelier competition. Driven by the constant pursuit of self-betterment and sincere love of hospitality, David aims to join the ranks of Master Sommelier in the near future.</p>
	<p><b>Dustin Chabert (Chicago, IL)</b> Dustin Chabert is a wine professional based in the Chicago area whose sommelier and restaurant stints include Next, Swift &amp; Sons, Nico Osteria, The Publican, Momotaro, Henri and the famed Spiaggia. He is the current Best USA Sommelier Competition champion, earning his victory in 2019.</p>



**Eduardo Bolaños (Antico Nuovo, Los Angeles, CA)**

Eduardo Bolaños began his wine career in Beverly Hills, CA under the tutelage of the Spago Beverly Hills Wine Director, Chris Miller. Working at Spago, Eduardo Bolaños assisted in building the wine cellar that won the Wine Spectator “Grand Award” in 2010. Eduardo went on to work for top restaurants in Los Angeles Pizzeria Mozza and Chi Spacca. In 2012 he spent time abroad working the wine harvest in Spain, while working as a sommelier at three-star Michelin restaurants Arzak and Akelare. Then in 2014 became an Advanced Sommelier with the Court of Master Sommeliers. Eduardo currently works as a sommelier at Antico Nuovo in Los Angeles as well as a retail buyer for Wine House LA.

**Elli Benchimol, (Apero, Washington, DC)**

Elli Benchimol, is a third level advanced sommelier and mixologist hybrid, she brings more than 22 years of experience to the hospitality industry. She is the owner of Apero in Georgetown, Washington DC’s only Champagne and Caviar inspired restaurant. She first developed an interest in wine while working at the Fifth Floor in San Francisco under the reign of Raj Parr and Laurent Gras. She was the Lead Sommelier at Joe’s Seafood, Prime Steak and Stone Crab in Washington, D.C. for the past five years, and has had previous sommelier positions with the beverage team at Range and Aggio by Bryan Voltaggio in DC and Baltimore, Frank Ruta’s Grille Room at the Rosewood Hotel in Georgetown, and lead sommelier at Adour by Alain Ducasse in DC’s St. Regis Hotel. Elli has also developed corporate beverage programs for multiple restaurant groups, Chef Geoff’s five Restaurants and Stir Food Groups’ four Restaurants. Elli’s first sommelier position in DC was at Rasika Penn Quarter with a short year in Miami opening Michael Mina’s Bourbon Steak. Originally from San Francisco, Elli grew up in Northern California’s wine country, attended San Francisco State, and worked at some of the best chef driven restaurants in the city, under talented wine mentors with award winning wine lists. Elli is currently studying for her final level in the Court of Master Sommeliers, Elli loves teaching about wine, spirits and food, both privately and publicly, through her consulting LLC, and Apero.



**Francis Kulaga (Brasserie 4, Walla Walla, WA)**

Born in New York City, Walla Walla based Francis Kulaga is a Certified Sommelier, CSW, CSS, Certified Cicerone®, and a Certified BJCP judge. He currently works as a sommelier at Brasserie Four and College Cellars. Francis attends the EV program at WWCC and has a lab internship at Artifex Wine Company. In his spare time, he enjoys judging beer festivals in the Pacific Northwest and travel. Francis has been lucky enough to visit the world’s major wine regions and over 110 countries. His greatest passion is educating people about wine.



**James Nelson (Charlotte, NC)**

James Nelson brings over 15 years of industry experience and extensive wine and spirits knowledge to the Best USA Sommelier Association competition. Nelson spent years in Washington, DC, working with top brands in the hospitality industry. Most recently, he was the Food & Beverage Director at the AC Hotel where he oversaw all food and beverage operations for the new hotel opening. From 2015-2019, Nelson held the position of Beverage Director at BLT Prime by David Burke and BLT Steak DC during this time he was tasked with managing \$5 million in beverage sales between the two restaurants in DC. As Bar Director at Poste Moderne Brasserie from 2013-2015, he created craft cocktail menus for the Kimpton Hotel Group where his passion for the industry was born. In addition to his roles at impressive restaurants and hotels, he has also taken the Advanced Sommelier Course and intends to sit for the Advanced Exam in the near future. He has also started the Diploma Course for the Wine and Spirits Education Trust with an end goal of achieving the Master of Wine Designation.

Prior to working in restaurants and hotels, he worked as a Network Systems Analyst with the Delaware National Guard. In his spare time, Nelson can be found cooking and enjoying local restaurants.



**Jonathan Eichholz (New York City)**

Jonathan Eichholz is a nerd living the dream. A Neuroscientist and Historian turned Sommelier after a summer whispering sweet nothings to cheese in the caves of Murray’s. Since graduating from Colby College, Jonathan has served as a sommelier at Michelin-starred Aquavit and The Modern. In 2019, Jonathan was named Best Young Sommelier in America and Second-Best Young Sommelier in The World. He is an Advanced Sommelier, Certified Cicerone, and New York hip-hop aficionado.



**Kaysie Rogers (The Breakers, Palm Beach, FL)**

Kaysie Rogers came into the wine world after a successful career as a pastry chef. While traveling around the world giving master classes and competing on Food Network shows she would make excursions to nearby wine regions and caught the wine bug. Considering wine as another adventure and career, she returned to Seattle, passed the CMS Intro, Certified, and Advanced exams in short order, and completed the WSET Diploma program. First working as a sommelier at Wild Ginger and The Metropolitan Grill in Seattle, she recently joined the wine team at HMF - The Breakers in West Palm Beach working with their Grand Award-winning list. Looking to the future, she hopes to open a Champagne Bar and pursue her Master Sommelier accreditation.

	<p><b>Max Goldberg (Maybourne Hotel, Beverly Hills, CA)</b>  Max's journey for hospitality began in the kitchen of a small restaurant near his hometown of Redondo Beach, CA. The owner of that restaurant then convinced him to attend the Culinary Institute of America to hone his craft. It was in his second year at CIA, that he started developing a passion for wine. Max went on to do a semester in Napa Valley where he met Christie Dufault, who was immensely helpful in teaching him every aspect of being a Sommelier! She also helped him obtain a job at Restaurant Gary Danko where he was then able to learn from the incredible wine minds of Jeremiah Morehouse, Chris Gaither, Freddy Foot, and Vince Morrow.  After a short while, Max moved back to Los Angeles and was one of the opening Sommeliers for Jean-Georges at the Waldorf Astoria where he was fortunate enough to sell and taste many of the world's greatest wines. After two years, he left the Waldorf Astoria to help build the wine program at the West Hollywood Edition in late 2019. Shortly after starting at the new hotel, Max successfully passed his Advanced Sommelier Exam. In March 2020, Max was furloughed (along with most of the wine community) and used the time off as an opportunity to work his first harvest and spent the summer working with Chris Miller at Seabold Cellars in Monterey where he assisted with not only winemaking but also sales.  Max now finds himself running the wine program for the Maybourne Hotel in Beverly Hills and is excited to add another great wine list into LA's booming wine scene.</p>
	<p><b>Mark Hartnett (Vino di Vino, Needham, MA)</b></p>
	<p><b>Mark Guillaudeu (Commis, Oakland, CA)</b>  Mark Guillaudeu's career in wine began at Glen's Garden Market in the Dupont Circle neighborhood of Washington, D.C.. Fresh from a Master's program in Buddhist Studies, an entry-level position as a cashier quickly became a management role assisting with the beer, wine, and coffee programs at the all-local, all-sustainable/organic market. The list there focused exclusively on wines from the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic US, so after completing his WSET 3 Mark left Glen's to pursue an opportunity to sell the wines of the wide world he had been studying. This led to sommelier roles at the tiny Curious Grape in Shirlington, Virginia, and then roles with Richard Sandoval and Robert Wiedemaier's restaurant groups before, the night of his final WSET Diploma exam, Mark packed the last of his belongings and set off for a three day drive to California (he finished in two). Since then he has earned his Advanced Sommelier certification, been named one of Wine &amp; Spirits Magazine's Best New Sommeliers in 2019, entered into the second stage of the Master of Wine Program and enjoyed much competitive success as a sommelier. He headed the beverage program at Roka Akor in the Financial District and, since October of 2017, the two Michelin-starred Commis in the Piedmont neighborhood of Oakland. The attached bar and cocktail program, c.d.p., was named the Best Bar in the East Bay by SF Magazine and one of Esquire's Best Bars in America in 2019. A firm believer in the power of a rising tide, Mark's priority remains the students he has mentored as he prepares to sit the rigorous Master of Wine and Master Sommelier exams in 2022.</p>
	<p><b>Sophie Yoneoka (Colorado Springs, CO)</b>  Sophie Yoneoka is currently an off-premise wine buyer for Sovereignty Wines in Colorado Springs, Colorado. She has previously worked as a lead sommelier and wine director for multiple fine dining establishments all over the city and over the years competed in the Chaine des Rotisseurs Best Young Sommelier as well as Ruinart Challenge. She is currently preparing for the CMS Masters Diploma.</p>
	<p><b>Walden Pemantle (Texas Wine School, Houston, TX)</b></p>
	<p><b>Winn Robertson (Bourbon Steak, Washington, DC)</b>  Winn Robertson began his restaurant career in 2000 bussing tables full of tacos while studying music at Penn State University. With years of passion for food &amp; cooking already under his belt it was no surprise he caught the wine bug with relative ease. Life then took Winn to Las Vegas where he cut his teeth on many different restaurant positions in restaurants such as Nobhill, Craftsteak, and Carnevino.  After a stint of wine study in California, Winn returned to his native Washington, DC to open Michael Mina's Bourbon Steak DC. There he works with a world-wide wine list featuring affordable finds up to aged first-growth Bordeaux. With a passion for teaching, Winn looks forward to staff training at Bourbon Steak as well as outside engagements.</p>
	<p><b>Yannick Benjamin (Contento, NYC)</b>  Yannick Benjamin is the Head Sommelier of Contento Restaurant and a proud New Yorker from Hell's Kitchen. Born into a family of French restaurateurs, Yannick has worked for many highly regarded restaurants throughout NYC: Le Cirque, Oceana, Jean-Georges, Atlas, Felidia, and Atelier at the Ritz-Carlton. Additionally, he has worked for ten years for Le Du's Wines, one of the top wine retail stores in Manhattan. In 2003, a car accident left Benjamin paralyzed from the waist down. However, his passion for wine drove him to quickly adapt, outfitting his wheelchair with a table that allowed him to continue working as a sommelier to educate on wine. Yannick went on to create "Wine on Wheels," one of New York City's largest and most exciting wine events. "Wine on Wheels" brings hundreds of esteemed sommeliers together to pour over 180 wines from around the world for noble charity. Yannick's tireless work and innovative vision is bringing awareness and visibility to seldom-heard voices in the wine industry and championing inclusivity. Yannick Benjamin has brought his energy and passion to East Harlem with the newly opened Contento. Contento is a barrier free restaurant where wine and food come</p>

	<p>together and where they share a story of who they are and where social sustainability will be practiced and where they also use their experiences and location to offer enriched programs that will enhance the quality of life for people living with disabilities.</p>
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