



Auro sommelier Derek Stevenson | Four Seasons Resort and Residences Napa Valley

## WINE

# This Rising Star Napa Sommelier Got His Start in a Diner

Derek Stevenson at Michelin-starred Auro is paving the way for other Black professionals in the wine world

by [Maria C. Hunt](#) | Nov 8, 2024, 8:00am PST

**W**hen Derek Stevenson was 14, his mom gave him a choice: work for her personalized T-shirt business or go find a job. He chose the latter. He liked making dinner for his sisters and his grandmother, so he was thrilled to get paid actual money for cooking. His first gig was making omelets, toast, and sausage at a diner in New Holstein, Wisconsin. It looks like he made the right choice. “I was lucky to figure out what I wanted to do so early,” Stevenson says.

Just 14 years after that diner debut, Stevenson runs the wine program at Auro, the Michelin-starred restaurant at the Four Seasons Resort and Residences Napa Valley in Calistoga. At the Four Seasons, Stevenson’s wine program and his collaboration on pairings with chef Rogelio Garcia helped earn Auro a Michelin star in 2023. In addition to his job at the Four Seasons, Stevenson, 29, has a side hustle: He’s the in-house sommelier for a growing Black-owned beer brand, Moor’s Brewing Co.

As a young Black man, Stevenson is a rarity in the U.S. world of fine wine and beverages. Just 1 percent of American wineries and breweries are Black-owned, and just 2 percent of wine professionals identify as Black. His journey from short-order cook to up-and-coming sommelier in the Napa Valley is fantastical, even to him. “It’s crazy and it’s surreal,” says Stevenson. “I still have friends who work in those same restaurants in Wisconsin. I just really wanted to get out and do something new.”

As a sommelier, Stevenson’s food-first philosophy is informed by his chef training at the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park. Garcia says Stevenson is always ready with thoughtful wines, whether for Scottish langoustine or 21-day, dry-aged wagyu beef. “Usually I’ll come up with a dish and he’ll fill in the blanks,” Garcia says. “The goal is always to elevate it. The food is good but ... the wine takes it to the next level.”

He also brings a new level of confidence and warmth to the way wine is served at the luxury hotel with impressive decanters, a new wine list with features on individual producers, and his down-to-earth way of getting people interested in trying something new. “My philosophy is bringing wine to everyone,” says Stevenson. “And I love storytelling. I think that a big part of the enjoyment of wine is the story that’s told around it.” One of his favorite stories is about the Domaine Schlumberger Riesling Grand Cru Saering from an Alsatian winery owned by the same family for 300 years. “When people see that, they start to fantasize about that life,” he says. “They think of the castles and the holdings and ancient cellars the family has. That excites me and I think it excites other people as well.”

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His excitement about wines comes across to diners, says **Derek Baljeu**, winemaker at **Knights Bridge Winery** in Calistoga. “He has a really joyful energy so he ends up bringing a level of upscale casual,” Baljeu says. “Anybody he needs to impress with his level and depth of wine knowledge, he can. He has such a warmth and approachability about it.” Baljeu recalled taking his parents, who aren’t big wine drinkers, to the Four Seasons for lunch one afternoon. Baljeu ordered a bottle of Grand Cru Chablis, a French chardonnay. “[It’s] not the easiest wine to understand: It’s reduced and stony and racy and savory and saline,” Baljeu says. “Derek broke it down in terms any wine novice could understand. My mom was like, ‘That makes so much sense.’”

Stevenson says he’s grateful to his mom, Amy Jo, for supporting his early dreams of becoming a celebrity chef, and the chefs and colleagues who helped him hone his skills as he transformed himself from a cook to a wine country sommelier. At his second cooking job at the Osthoff Resort in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, Stevenson learned everything from how to hold a knife the right way to making soups from scratch. He did so well that the chef encouraged him to attend the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park.

Stevenson dreamed of being the next Guy Fieri as he chopped and sauteed his way through culinary school. But just before graduation, he had an epiphany: In most elite kitchens, teams work in silence. He realized he liked talking to people. “They wanted that part of my personality to go away,” he says. “Those culinary schools are trying to mold you into the best possible kitchen worker, and then you can turn yourself into a chef if you have the drive.”

He was intrigued by his CIA wine tasting course, where he tasted an Inniskillin ice wine that showed him how wine could be balanced, and bright and sweet at the same time. “It was a full-on wine awakening,” he says. “After realizing wine could be a career, I fell in love with the way it brings people together.”

After graduation, he moved to Chicago and worked his way through beverage roles at the Aviary, the Office, and Next in Grant Achatz’s Alinea Group. Jarmel Doss, then an assistant beverage director at Alinea, recalls that at 19, Stevenson was driven to learn as much as he could. “He was very adamant about what he wanted. He was like, ‘I’m going into wine and I want to be a sommelier,’” says Doss, a World’s Best Bartender finalist and current Fam Hospitality Group beverage director.

Stevenson credits Doss with helping him train his palate to look for balance. “She would intentionally leave something out [of a drink], like lemon or bitters,” he recalls. “She was like, ‘Taste this and tell me what’s missing.’”

Doss says Stevenson was promoted from barback to server at the Office, because of his expertise in talking about flavors. “He got so good at having those conversations with guests and understanding what kind of flavor profiles they were looking for in their cocktails,” she says. “Once he decided to go for it, he took off and did not look back. I’m proud of him.”

While working at Next, he teamed up with coworker Damon Patton and Jamhal Johnson to help launch Moor’s Brewing Co. Stevenson is the brewery’s resident sommelier who consults on the blend of grains and other flavor additions for brews like their Stroll’s Unforgettable Brown Ale and Imperial Porter.

Stevenson says he left Chicago in 2022 with important lessons in the art of fine dining, gleaned from head sommelier Ryan Berry and co-owner Michael Muser at chef Curtis Duffy’s Ever. “Michael Muser gave me a 101 on dining room showmanship,” Stevenson says — things like silently placing a wine glass by a guest and immediately pouring the wine into it, or having two members of the service team approach a table from opposite sides of the room and set plates in front of diners in unison. “There’s a dance to it,” he says.

The unusual decanters Stevenson uses to pour red wines at Auro are another hallmark of luxury wine service. The most stunning glassware on rotation right now is Riedel’s Eve decanter, which resembles a glass cobra, and another called Winewings which looks like a 3-foot-long Nike swoosh. “It draws people in and creates a conversation,” he says. “Beyond that, it’s a great benefit for the wine.”

Those touches, along with service style and understanding the cuisine at Auro and sister restaurant Truss were key to creating a Michelin-level wine program. “If you just buy wine you like or that’s popular, it may trample over the food, flavor-wise,” Stevenson says. He built Truss and Auro’s 375-bottle list to be versatile. There are plenty of cabernet sauvignons to pair with burgers and steaks, plus aromatic white wines to complement Garcia’s fresh and delicate cuisine, dishes such as his dry-aged hiramasa, or yellowtail amberjack, with pluots, avocado, and citrus lime aguachile. Flavors like those need dry rieslings, chenin blancs, and whites from France’s Loire Valley, Sonoma Coast, and the Pacific Northwest.

He’s discovering boutique wines that were mostly unavailable to him in Chicago, such as pinot noirs from Shibumi Knoll Vineyards, the wines from Impensata Wine, and the Work Vineyard wines by Kari Auringer, who was the assistant winemaker under Celia Welch on the cult wine Scarecrow.

Even though he’s a long way from Wisconsin, Stevenson says he’s loved the community he’s found with coworkers and other Black wine professionals like Baljeu; Vinny Morrow, the Master Sommelier at Press; DLynn Proctor, director of Fantesca Wines; and Mike Evans, the sommelier at La Toque, as well as in the larger wine community. “Derek has done such a wonderful job of having that warm personality, but he means business,” says Michaela Murphy, estate director at Stony Hill in St. Helena, and a colleague from Stevenson’s Alinea Group days. She says his wine dinner series helped make Auro and Truss a buzzy place for locals to dine. “He has a drive and he’s on a mission.”

Stevenson believes he arrived in Napa Valley at just the right time. “Napa is starting to represent,” he says, referring to the growing number of BIPOC beverage professionals. He shares this advice with other “outsiders” looking to make their way in Napa Valley: “Just take your space. Nobody is going to hand you that job or give you certifications. You have to go and work for it, but it is attainable.”