

8 Tips For Launching A Career In Food And Wine



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I write about the people, business and politics of the wine industry. [FULL BIO](#) ▾

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Note: A few months ago I taught a course at the University of Bologna Business School (BBS) to students in their MBA program for Food and Wine. The course was called Narrative and Innovation, and each day I faced a class full of students from around the world, each with a different background in the hospitality industry and each with different ideas for where it's going next. This past weekend, those students were part of the commencement ceremony for some 400 graduates of all programs at BBS, and their keynote address was offered by Stevie Kim, Managing Director of VinItaly International. I've taken this opportunity to imagine myself in their shoes.

Imagine that you've taken the time out of your career — and out of your entire life — to enroll in an MBA program that specializes in the business of food and wine. In Bologna, Italy no less. Imagine that you're at your graduation ceremony, armed with a new degree and in position for your next professional challenge. What can the keynote speaker say that will actually help you? What message will you actually remember?



Any of us can read [Stevie Kim's commencement address here in English](#), including slides, but it helps first to add some context.

In her everyday work life, Kim already faces many of the challenges that these students will face as the food and wine industries evolve in the coming generation. They will face the challenge, for example, of more nuanced global integration. They will face the challenge of developing business savvy, especially one that complements and counterbalances the romanticized notions of “craft” and “artisanal” that are so popular right now. They will face the challenge of navigating the waters of unexplored or under-understood oceans of opportunity. And they will face the challenge of doing all of that one day, one conversation, and one tweet or post at a time.

The truth is that the graduates may or may not remember Kim's advice. The point is that they *should*.

She presented six lessons of advice to these graduates that I came to know. Most of those students have significant work experience. They all have opinions and purpose. They're ready to take what they've learned and absorbed and internalized, and apply it to their next roles, whether that's in their home countries of China or Peru or Italy or the U.S.

The commencement exercises were an appropriate send off for them. Here's my hunch — read between the lines — for what the students took away from what Stevie Kim said and did at the podium last weekend.

1. Have a sense of humor. Not all the time. Just at the beginning and the end and sometimes in between.
2. You don't have to know everything about your field — wine, say — to have an impact. It may even be better if you don't, because then you'll speak in a language that everyone will understand.
3. Work and life experience trumps book learning any day.
4. The work you do now is probably not going to be the work you do five or even ten years from now.
5. "Terrible situations are just an unfortunate series of events," Kim said, "unless you turn them into an opportunity."
6. Fight the uphill battles. They're uphill for a reason — there's a lot of room for improvement, and a lot of opportunity to carve your space and make your name. In the case of Italian wine, that uphill battle is China, where Italian wine captures 5 to 7% of the market share. (French wine, by comparison, captures nearly 60%.) Just because it's hard doesn't mean you don't try.
7. Diversity has a ways to go — read opportunity — both in terms of people working within wine and the wine itself. About 80% of all French wine made in commercial quantities is made from just fifteen kinds of grapes. About 80% of all California wines are made from only eight cultivars.
8. Meditate for mental stability. "I highly recommend it," Kim said.

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