

## Q&A WITH KEVIN ZRALY, WINE EDUCATOR, WINDOWS ON THE WORLD WINE SCHOOL

The author of the top-selling wine education book in the world talks about breaking down barriers in wine, why tasting matters and what makes his students king.

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ver 19,000 wine students have attended Kevin Zraly's Windows on the World Wine School. Until 9/11, sessions were held at the top of the World Trade Center—a

brehtaking backdrop to sniff and sip. The course continues today in Midtown Manhattan, still selling out solely through word of mouth. As an instructor, Zraly is at once animated, humble, brilliant and downright funny, and his classes are filled with students eager to taste and learn. His book, *Windows on the World: Complete Wine Course*, continues to be the top-selling wine book in the world. All this from a man who ironically is allergic to wine and has to take medicine after imbibing to prevent a reaction.

**Wine Enthusiast:** How have the demographics of your students changed over the years?

**Kevin Zraly:** In 1976, most students were men. These days it's definitely closer to a 50/50 split. And no age barrier exists. I remember a few years ago when a 21-year-old young man befriended an 81-year old man on the first day of class. The two of them sat together throughout the course.

**WE:** What have you learned from your students over the years?

**KZ:** That the teacher is always a student. Ninety percent of my students are consumers, so I literally have the whole wine market in front of me—people who are out buying and trying wines in stores and restaurants. Listening to them keeps me abreast on spending and drinking habits. During my course, students have a weekly homework assignment to bring in a label from a wine they have recently tried. Trying to figure out how much they spent becomes a test for me.

**WE:** What do you hope students take from the course?

**KZ:** The notion that wine tasting is a very subjective area—there are no definitive answers. Prior to the 1985 version of the book, there was no tasting chapter: the focus was more on theory. Today, there is definitely more emphasis on tasting. In sixteen hours, it's impossible to make someone completely knowledgeable about wine, but tasting helps to better understand complex components like bouquet, tannin, aroma and body.

**WE:** Describe your role as instructor.



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**KZ:** My wine course costs \$995 for eight classes, which breaks down to \$125 an evening—the same price as a ticket to a Broadway show. So it's like I'm on Broadway in a limited run. My audience members include accountants, lawyers, those out of school, people back in school—truly a broad spectrum.

**WE:** Besides location, what else has changed about your course since 9/11?

**KZ:** At Windows on the World, I offered five courses a year. Today we offer a session in the spring and another in the fall. However, the amount of students has increased from about 60 or 70 at WOW to about 125 today. All that remains from Windows on the World are the spouses and children of the employees. They are always welcome to attend any of my classes free of charge. [The 2010 edition of the book features a section on Zraly's longstanding personal history with the restaurant, where he served as wine director from 1976–2001.]

**WE:** How did the book come about?

**KZ:** When I founded the wine school 33 years ago, no suitable textbook existed. The owners of the company that publishes my book took my course, and at the end asked me to write a book the same way I teach. The book's format is Q&A, and divided into “classes” rather than “chapters,” to mirror the wine school.

**WE:** What have you added to this edition?

**KZ:** After the devastation of September 11, I didn't travel. For this edition, I decided to visit wine regions previously undiscovered to me, as well as return to others to see what was new.

Without these updates, doing a 25th anniversary edition would not be relevant. Though the book is titled *The Complete Wine Course*, perhaps “incomplete” would be a better descriptor—wines and regions are constantly evolving.

**WE:** What's next for you?

**KZ:** I recently partnered with Tim Zagat to break down the wine lists at over a hundred of New York's restaurants, so diners can see beforehand the best bottle values. I'm going to continue the wine school. I'll be releasing a wine journal, and I'm writing another book that features some of my mentors. I've also written a screenplay that has nothing to do with wine. It's just a very exciting time. —KELLY MAGYARICS