

Raising the Bar on Equity in Australia's Wine Industry

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As the Australian grape and wine sector navigates a period of significant transformation marked by evolving consumer expectations, global competition, and ongoing workforce challenges, strengthening diversity and inclusion has become more critical than ever. In a landmark move, Wine Australia has introduced the Australian Wine Industry Gender Equity Toolkit, a comprehensive resource designed to help businesses foster fairer, more inclusive and future-ready workplaces.

To understand the motivation behind this initiative, its industry-wide implications, and how it fits into Wine Australia's long-term vision for a resilient and innovative sector, NUFFOODS Spectrum spoke with Dr Liz Waters, Chief Operating Officer at Wine Australia. In this insightful conversation, Dr Waters discusses the research that shaped the Toolkit, the challenges uncovered across the wine value chain, and the practical steps that businesses large and small can take to drive meaningful change. She also reflects on the role of equity in strengthening the industry's talent pipeline, competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

What prompted the development of the Australian Wine Industry Gender Equity Toolkit, and how does it align with Wine Australia's broader vision for a more sustainable and resilient grape and wine sector?

The Toolkit was developed to help the Australian grape and wine sector harness the full potential of its people. Research commissioned by Wine Australia and led by the University of South Australia identified gender inequity as a key barrier to workforce participation, leadership development and long-term business sustainability.

By promoting practical, evidence-based approaches to improving equity and inclusion, the Toolkit supports Wine Australia's broader vision of a thriving, innovative and resilient sector that reflects the diversity of the communities it represents and is better positioned to meet future challenges.

The Toolkit was developed following extensive research and industry consultation. What were some of the key insights or challenges uncovered about gender equity within Australia's wine sector during this process?

The research found that while the sector has made progress in recent years, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership and technical roles, and many workplaces still lack formal structures to support flexible work and career progression.

It also revealed that inequity is not always intentional, but often stems from long-standing cultural norms, informal networks and limited access to mentoring or role models. Importantly, the study highlighted a strong appetite for change, with a number of businesses seeking practical guidance on how to build more inclusive, high-performing teams.

From a practical standpoint, how do you envision wineries and grape businesses of varying sizes implementing the Toolkit's recommendations, especially smaller regional operators with limited resources?

The Toolkit was designed with scalability in mind. It offers a range of tools, from simple self-assessment checklists and policy templates to case studies and action plans, that can be adapted to suit grape and wine businesses of any size.

For smaller operators, even small steps such as reviewing recruitment practices, establishing flexible work options or developing mentorship opportunities can make a meaningful difference. The focus is on achievable, incremental actions that build a more equitable and attractive workplace over time.

How can improving gender equity and inclusion contribute to addressing some of the wider economic and structural challenges currently facing the Australian wine industry?

Improving gender equity strengthens the industry's talent pipeline and helps businesses access a broader range of skills and perspectives. These are critical advantages in an increasingly competitive global market.

Research consistently shows that diverse teams drive better innovation, decision-making and financial performance. For the Australian wine sector, greater inclusion can support workforce retention, enhance reputation among trade and consumers, and help attract new entrants to regional communities, contributing to the sector's long-term resilience.

The Toolkit emphasises not just awareness but action. What measurable outcomes or progress indicators will Wine Australia use to assess the impact of this initiative in the coming years?

Wine Australia will track adoption and impact through measures such as increased industry engagement with the Toolkit, uptake of gender equity policies and programs, and improvements in representation of women across leadership, technical and operational roles.

These indicators will be complemented by ongoing qualitative feedback from industry and future research to benchmark progress and identify emerging priorities for action.

Looking ahead, how will Wine Australia continue to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion across the sector, and are there plans to expand similar initiatives to other underrepresented groups or sustainability themes?

Gender equity is one part of a broader commitment to our sector's workforce within the One Grape & Wine Sector Plan. Our aim is to help create a sector that is not only environmentally responsible and economically sustainable, but also socially inclusive and future-ready.

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