



*Editor: Julie Pedroncelli St. John*

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Dear Allison,

Recalling the early days of the pandemic which included working remotely, cleaning products and toilet paper in short supply and the virtual world replacing many activities like business meetings and socializing. I took part in a few Zoom cocktail sessions which were fun. About a month into the stay at home orders I wondered if anyone would like to join me in a virtual coffee get-together. I love a good cup of coffee and I enjoy the conversations I have had over said cup of coffee.

I floated the idea via Facebook and several people nibbled at the concept so I put down the first date for what would become known as my COVID Coffee Chat-April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020. Not everyone who was interested ended up joining. The blessing in disguise came in the form of six women who answered the call and the friendships made during this time. We have been meeting every week for about 50 sessions (we skipped a day once in a while).

A screen shot of our group:



That's me on the top left.

Allison Levine, owner of Please the Palate and a freelance wine writer and podcaster, Southern CA

Betsy Nachbauer, owner of ACORN Winery, Healdsburg CA

E Slater, owner of InShort Direct Marketing and co-founder of Wine industry Network, Oregon

Cindy Lowe Rynning, owner of Grape Experiences and a wine writer, Illinois

Dr. Elizabeth Smith PhD, TravelWineChick and freelance wine and food writer, Napa CA.

While wine is the obvious thread we all have in common I'll point to wine education as the deeper link. We all one way or another write or talk about wine and educate through our various roles. Food is another affinity especially when one of us mentions chocolate.

The span of subjects over 50 plus meetings was focused on COVID guidelines, vaccination news, which tier we were in Red? Orange?. Next up could be the politics of the moment, the shared name of three of our members (Elizabeth), how tall we are, hair styles of the past, or our background stories. The conversations always included advice, listening, swearing, lots of laughter, tears, shared frustrations, celebrations, opinions, commiseration. Pretty much what we would do if we met in person.

I will tell you we experienced many milestones in this time together. Some life changing, some happy, some sad. Examples of the arc were always reflected in the latest turn of the pandemic. Two of us had tasting rooms that open/closed/opened again and then were put under strict and limiting guidelines. Some of us were very careful because of compromised health and followed the hard and fast rules to protect others as well as ourselves. E had just moved to a new state-a couple of weeks before the pandemic began-and because of the situation she and her husband have made exactly one friend who had moved just before them into the same building. Allison took us with her (via her phone) when she received her first and second vaccinations. Birthday milestones were cheered on-one each turned 50, 60 and 70 but I'm not telling who.

Other exciting changes or additions in the last year included: Allison and Cindy began Crush on This a weekly video series focused on different wine subjects. E wrote a book which gathered her knowledge from teaching classes about selling wine in the tasting room and is soon to be published. Because of the pandemic Elizabeth changed her career course and became a freelance author of numerous articles on

food and wine as well as started her own pet sitting service, named after her beloved cat Einstein who passed in October. Betsy worked hard to change and stay afloat amidst the challenges of operating during the pandemic and with much success.

Just as in real life, loss was a theme throughout the year with family members and cherished pets passing. The most memorable was when one of our group received a phone call during our chat and heard the news her mother had passed. I can't tell you how painful it was but it was a moment witnessed by the five others, sharing in her grief and touching each of us deeply.

This month Allison brought a group of media friends (she would want me to include that all of us were vaccinated) and had dinner at Pedroncelli. Betsy and her husband Bill were co-hosts. All brought together by the COVID Coffee Chat experience.

Connection. This is how it all started. During the pandemic we craved what we were missing and found ways to reach out and bond. We will continue with our chats and one day we will gather together around a table at a café. Over the last year there was a lot of hope for things to change, for the guidelines to lift, for travel to begin again. The blessing in disguise was the gift of time and getting to know someone on a deeper level. How about you, do you have a similar pandemic experience you'd like to share? I would love to hear from you!

Until next time stay well and connected.  
Julie

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