

THE KNOWLEDGE OF WINE

As the global wine trade becomes ever more corporatised and competitive, having skilled employees with an intimate knowledge of not just wine, but the wine business, becomes ever more important. Sally Easton MW explains how.

Winemakers and viticulturalists have their own specialist oenology and viticultural qualifications. But what qualifications are available for those who want a serious career working with wine, but who don't want to be winemakers?

A number of qualifications exist, both inside and outside traditional academia. The Master of Wine (MW), Master Sommelier (MS), and Wine MBA represent the peak of these, while there are also the Wine & Spirit Education Trust courses offered in 42 countries, with various societies of wine educators around the world also offering qualifications.

Master of Wine (MW): Mt Everest

The Master of Wine (MW) is a UK-based qualification that's highly coveted within that market, though it is gaining recognition internationally. Executive director of the Institute of Masters of Wine, Siobhan Turner said it "is a membership body that promotes a cross disciplinary approach to understanding wine at the highest level. It is the premier group of people fostering wine trade education with a global perspective and a complete approach to the cycle of wine from choosing the site for a vineyard through to understanding consumption of wine and all the social, political, economic and environmental factors around it."

Since its inception in 1953, the MW came under fire for being some quirky British exam, but since becoming an international qualification in 1983, it has grown into an organisation whose 264 members are widely respected around the world. Fifteen years ago, when American Mary Ewing-Mulligan passed the MW, those who knew about

the MW in the USA "were either very clued-in trade people or serious consumers or collectors. Today," she said, "recognition of the title has increased in both depth and breadth." Now, 30% of the membership and 70% of students come from outside the UK.

A straw poll of the main UK supermarkets and top companies show many of them use MWs, either as direct employees or in a consulting role, justifying its €5,000 cost. Waitrose has a long-standing philosophy of employing MWs, currently six - three in the buying team, and three consultants - and the company has the most well-regarded wine range of all the supermarkets. Justin Howard-Sneyd MW, the company's manager of wine buying said: "as a fast-growing business with a great reputation for the quality of our wine range, and as the complexity of what we offer increases, we need talented people to make sure that our team stays ahead of the game."

Master Sommelier (MS)

"MSs are 'front of the house' people," explained Brian Julyan, chief executive of the Court of Master Sommeliers. "Their job is working in restaurants, so when customers ask questions, sommeliers need to answer. Everything we test is done orally, and has to do with doing the job. We identify those who are masters of their craft."

The MS is examined orally, with a practical exam in front of a jury, involving: serving a bottle of wine equally between a number of glasses; decanting; answering questions about vintages, products and food, and making wine recommendations; setting up wine dinners; training a team to sell house wine; managing the

wine list's profitability, and preparing glassware for the table. The MS must also know about liqueurs and spirits.

From its UK origins in 1969, the MS appeared in the US in the mid 1980s, before both the MW and the WSET. Given the cultural desire for education with certification in the US, it is no surprise that more than two-thirds of the world's 120 MSs are based there, and that the other international educational bodies were slow to compete effectively.

Being both an MS and an MW, wine consultant and writer Doug Frost, who's also the vice chair of the American chapter of Court of Master Sommeliers, is well qualified to comment on the differences between these qualifications. "There is not a great deal of overlap between the two programs. The MS requires exhaustive knowledge of the rules and regulations throughout the wine producing world, as well as regions, grapes, producers and styles," he said. "The blind tasting component is rigorous but not as demanding as the MW. The largest focus of the MS is service, about which the MW is wholly silent. The MW focus upon grape and wine production, maturation and marketing is almost wholly absent from the MS program."

What does unify the MS and the MW is that they both have a master-apprentice philosophy, where those who have passed are expected to offer their services to help future candidates achieve mastery.

Wine MBA

Where the MW has one written paper (out of four) focused on the business and marketing aspects of the global industry, the Wine MBA's entire thrust is commerce and marketing.

Offered by the Bordeaux School of Management in academic partnership with the University of South Australia since 2001, it's an English language, 22 month program that costs €25,000. Based at three sites - Bordeaux, Adelaide and London - it is a fully accredited MBA. To enrol, prospective students need a Bachelor qualification plus five years of work experience in the wine industry. What makes it different from a generalist MBA is that the case studies and examples used throughout are from the wine industry, with the curriculum including marketing, corporate finance, strategic management, supply chain management and other typical MBA subjects.

Isabelle Dartigues, the school's director, said: "We address only professionals, which not all MBAs do, who are high position managers." She added "our pass rate is almost 100% because we have strict control during the year, so for example, when a student hasn't passed an exam or case study, we have a strict policy for the student to re-sit the test."

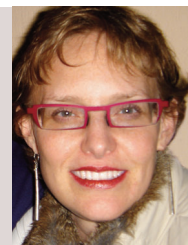
Cristián López, managing director of Cocha y Toro UK, achieved the Wine MBA in 2006. He was clear which qualification he wanted: "I'm passionate about the wine business and it needs more professional, more capable people," he says. "Some years ago maybe the old trade was seen as too social, and not organised so much by finance and marketing. But we need to know about exchange rates and currency fluctuation, about supply-demand economic issues and financial issues. Wine is a business, and it's difficult to make a margin."

A 2006 survey of alumni suggested that 41% of graduates had progressed vertically within their company, 47% had moved to larger international firms, with an average pay increase of 50%.

Where to begin (WSET)

In order to achieve the heights of any of the three top qualifications, education needs to start somewhere, and the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET) offers programmes at

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Siobhan Turner, director of the Institute of Masters of Wine

lower levels, including for spirits, which are open to both trade and consumer candidates. Since its 1970 inception, 5,718 people have passed the diploma. "The fully-supported nature of our courses is a particular strength," said David Wrigley, the Trust's international development director. "We offer full tutor materials so that there is no confusion when a student gets in front of exam paper."

As the WSET adapts to a global industry and a widening pool of locations, it has commissioned a research project in three key markets, the UK, Germany and the US, to identify ways to improve the product and commercial relevance of the qualifications.

"There are different demands and issues in different countries," said Ian Harris, chief executive of the WSET. "The UK is a mature market. The USA is in growth, but has the credit crunch. I have to convince people that the training budget should not be cut when times are hard. We can demonstrate that training puts money on the bottom line - we did some research that showed £1,000 of investment put £42,000 on the bottom line in three months."

A US organisation, The Society of Wine Educators (SWE), also offers wine education and certification, tapping into the American hunger for credentials. Their president, Sharron McCarthy, said: "our mission is to promote wine education throughout the world. We have over 2,000 members, including a chapter in Japan".

The bottom line

The financial reward from gaining wine qualifications is hard to measure, especially as personal motivation is a

clear driver for all the top qualifications. Increased profile and reputation follow, even though some people remain confused about what the MS and MW mean. South African Cathy van Zyl MW, who gained her qualification in 2005, said "it certainly didn't change my life financially, but I do far more wine judging and writing as a result of passing the MW. Most of the change has been personal; I derived a great deal of satisfaction, achievement and sense of self worth from passing the MW."

When Lopez started doing the MBA, he "was the managing director of Cocha y Toro UK, with four people and a turnover of £6m. Seven years later we have a turnover of £70m and an office with 30 people." This is not down to the MBA, he emphasised, but "the MBA helped me gain more experience; you learn and get better at what you do. And with that comes reward, a little more money, a little more responsibility."

Gérard Basset MS, MW, WineMBA, is the only person to have achieved all three top qualifications. In mid-1980s Britain, working in the hospitality sector, he reached the final of a sommelier competition and realised wine was his way forward. Basset said: "The MS was the logical choice for someone wanting to do sommeliery. But in the wine trade in England you were nothing if you weren't an MW. I enjoyed learning, about different things from the MS. Then when I sold my business in 2004, I remembered the Wine MBA. It was not a strategic plan to have all three, just an evolution for someone who had no school qualifications. Now it's a USP."

A common thread is the opportunity to network among current and future industry leaders and opinion formers. And regardless of whether the qualifi-

cation is achieved, contact books bulge. David Furer, who is a certified wine educator by the SWE, made four attempts at the MS. But, he says, he has “zero regrets. The process, even if you don’t get the MS, or the MW, is important. It’s the discipline, the accumulation of knowledge and the business contacts for your career that make the journey worthwhile.”

A diversity of careers

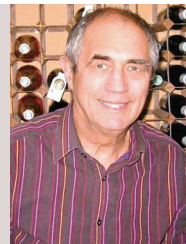
Global insight and networking are key to both the MW and WineMBA too. Dartigues said: “We travel to various parts of the world, which allows students to compare management practices. The aim is to build a global picture, and to benchmark practices across the wine world.”

While the MS is clearly devoted to the highest levels of wine service and experience at the table, and the wine MBA is focused at the purely business, marketing and commercial roles, MWs are found in broad and diverse careers, as journalists, educators, buyers, sellers, commercial directors and consultants. It’s difficult for someone looking in to identify a clear ‘path’ that MWs follow, because they don’t. But, as the Institute of MW’s Turner said: “if you’re looking for someone who can talk with confidence and authority with senior people in your business then the best person you can hire is an MW. He or she can speak authoritatively to your vineyard manager and your chief winemaker and your head of marketing and understand what your corporate social responsibility person is saying to you.”

Basset, who later this year takes on the presidency of the Court of Master Sommeliers, said the direction for the MS is “to keep education in the restaurant trade up to date and relevant. We need to encourage more people to come into the restaurant trade, despite the difficult, long hours.”

While it would be convenient for there to be a simple linear relationship between peak qualification and commercial success, it would be naïve to suggest such a thing. People who

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achieve these qualifications are ambitious, driven and successful, and thus attractive to employers, though Frost is apposite: “I am constantly counselling candidates to expect nothing. Any success is built one brick

at a time, one job at a time, one task at a time, and having an MW or MS after your name only offers you the opportunity to do more things. It’s up to you to make the most of those opportunities.” ■

Europe’s new initiative

To date, the world of wine education has been dominated by the US Society of Wine Educators, or UK institutions such as the Wine & Spirits Education Trust. Now there’s another player: the European Academy of Wine Education (EAW), which recently held its first conference in Austria.

The founding members are drawn from institutions and groups across Europe: Germany’s Geisenheim, the Culinary Institute of Norway’s vocational training of sommeliers; and the Wine Academy Austria, among others, from 16 countries.

“The time has come that Europe – and in that I include the UK – now needs stronger cooperation and networks, in terms of wine education,” says Dr Josef (Pepi) Schuller MW, director of the Austrian Wine Academy. “You now have institutions all over Europe, mushrooming in every country. We think there is the need for the standardisation of certification of educators.” One of the issues that arose from the EAW’s initial round table discussion was the need to accommodate local requirements. “As a country, Australia is extremely successful in

the world and successful in the UK,” explains Dr Schuller, by way of example, “but there are places where Australia is not established in the market, so there should be other countries featured more strongly in their syllabus.”

The need to give wine makers access to a broader wine education is also an issue. “All viticultural schools in the world teach more or less viticulture,

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Dr Josef Schuller MW

but they don’t teach about the wines of the world, which is quite surprising,” says Dr Schuller. “You look at people who are trained oenologists, who may end up working in the trade, and they are coming to us looking for more information about wines and spirits of the world.”

And, of course, there is a benefit for wine educators themselves, not least of which is having a forum where they can exchange ideas and keep up with their subject. There are also plans afoot to organise a European Conference for Wine Education on a regular basis, with Dr Klaus Schaller, the director of Geisenheim, offering the use of office space and support.

Felicity Carter