

Tales from successful MW students

31 Oct 2003 by JR

September brings the annual harvest of grapes in the northern hemisphere but it also yields an annual crop of Masters of Wine. Ten of these rarefied creatures will be collecting their certificates from the Master of the Vintners' Company in the City of London this Thursday night. All of these new MWs will have dedicated a minimum of two years and often more to study, put their jobs and family life at risk, and taken a week of fiendishly difficult exams both theoretical and practical (aka blind wine tasting) in pursuit of those coveted initials.

I took the exams back in 1984 when the wine world was considerably smaller, Californian wine tasted reliably Californian, Australian wine was a pimple on the vinous landscape, and we had never heard of physiological ripeness in grapes or micro- oxygenation of wines. I think today's exams must be truly terrifying.

Yet there is no shortage of candidates: 173 on the 2003 MW course with the greatest concentration from the US, UK and then Australia but also students from another 23 countries including the Maldives, Brazil and Japan. In the past few weeks I have been asked to sponsor applications for the 2004 course from an Oxford academic, a Bulgarian off-licence manager and an American wine writer who describes himself as Virginia Wine Man. There was even a Hollywood lawyer, Michael Doodan, with Fox and without any professional connection with wine whatsoever who successfully studied to become a Master of Wine in 1993. Some people are just exam junkies.

The [Institute of Masters of Wine](#) was founded exactly 30 years ago as an association of Britain's more cerebral wine merchants and continued very much in this cosy vein until the 1980s when the members realised that, despite their valiant consumption of red wine, Masters of Wine were not immortal and the Institute would have to internationalise or die. Michael Hill Smith of Australia (and now Shaw & Smith winery) was the first foreigner to pass the fiendishly difficult exams but now more than 50 of the 270- plus MWs are based outside Britain.

The process is a complicated one. First of all potential candidates have to convince the MW educators that they are worth teaching, by submitting an essay and tasting notes. They then have to cough up for the two- year Education Programme held in the UK, US and Australia - wherever they live - at the equivalent of around £1250 per year. Each candidate is assigned a mentor (who may live thousands of miles away) but often finds that a group of fellow students can be even more useful - especially in the training schedule required to become a blind tasting athlete.

The fateful exams are held in June (bad news for hay fever sufferers) on the same four days in Sydney, London and San Francisco, offering interesting possibilities for those prepared to take advantage of the time differences and able to do very last- minute revision.

Typical theory questions might be 'Discuss the factors that influence the choice of rootstock and scion' and 'How do you create a cult wine?' They look deceptively simple and have trapped many an unwary wine lover into having a go without the slightest hope of passing. Answers are expected to be very much more complicated than the questions.

There have long been complaints about a lack of feedback to both successful and unsuccessful candidates but, amazingly, the pass rate has been rising and now stands at about 30 per cent - much higher than 20 years ago.

And nowadays, once someone has finally managed to pass both Practical and Theoretical parts of the exam, they have, in a final test of devotion, to write a dissertation before being fully qualified as an MW. Recent subjects have included 'Parasitic Wasps - are they really a Practical Solution in California?' and 'Wine and the Heart - can the Wine Industry Benefit from Recent Medical Research?'

The first three MWs to be announced this year, who have not only passed both parts of the exam, in some cases after many a long year, but also had their dissertations approved, were German 'best sommelier in the world' Markus dei Monego, Colin Gent who works in Bordeaux for Europvin, and authority on English wine Stephen Skelton.

Cathy van Zyl, a Cape Town public relations consultant, is currently working on her dissertation and demonstrates the lengths to which candidates will go once that MW certificate is within their sights. Here is how she described her life immediately before the exams to a fellow student: 'For three and a half months, I did practically nothing else but study for at least four hours a day. Up at 07h00, get Luke ready for school, drop him off at 08h00, check mail and re- direct queries and generate a few ideas for business, 10h00 to 12h30 study, check emails and pretend to be working, spend half an hour with Luke, study from about 14h00 to 16h00, check emails and finish off the day's queries from clients and my partner, 17h00 collect Luke from after- school care, get Luke sorted for bed and make supper, 20h00 Luke to bed, have supper myself with Phil, read for an hour, sleep. Weekends - kick Luke and Philip out of my office and study from 09h00 to 20h00.'

Thanks to this punishing routine she managed to pass the theory papers at the first attempt and then had to fly back to London last June to tackle the three tasting exams. In preparation for this she submitted herself to something called 'dry tasting' (an activity, unknown to me, whereby you write notes on wines that are only theoretically in your glass), compiled a 40- page book of her own notes on how various wines should taste and be described, and took it with her everywhere - even on the exercise bike in the gym. She passed, and now the exact details of her strategy, note- taking and file- arranging are being relayed from screen to screen among fellow supplicants.

Another successful student in 2003 Sheri Sauter, who runs a New York wine marketing research company with her father, confesses that at this stage in her life she had been expecting to be studying for a PhD in Tudor history, 'but I decided the MW was a bit more interesting. And I have never been one to let a challenge go by...

I approached the exam like a marathon and tackled it from the physical perspective (wrote everything I could to get my hand in shape for a four- day exam), mental (positive visualization, stress and breathing techniques) and then, of course, worked on preparation of materials and refining my arguments. I also worked part- time in my local wine store to gain some first- hand retail experience. I visited bottling lines, talked to barrel makers, screw cap companies, cork companies and QA/ QC specialists. This year I also spent 10 days down in Chile working in a winery to gain some hands- on wine- making experience. And last September, I helped some home winemakers with their bottling process.

In terms of the tasting, one of the main things that helped me pass was my tasting group. I taste with several MW candidates, but oddly enough, it was my tasting group that is only consumers, no one connected with the MW program, that was the most helpful.

I was also able to take off from work several weeks before the exam to do nothing but study. And lastly, perhaps the oddest thing that I did, was to bring my mother with me out to San Francisco when I sat the exam (both last year and then this year with the paper 2 re- sit). It was hugely comforting to have someone along to eat meals with and wash glasses, etc. etc. It was also helpful to have someone around to help you "let go" of that segment of the exam and move on to the next part. I will admit that some of the other candidates found it amusing, but deciding to bring along a "support team" was one of the best decisions I made.'

We Masters of Wine are a disparate lot in all ways but two. We share a love of wine and a strong streak of masochism.