



Mistress of Wine

STUDYING FOR A **MASTER OF WINE** IS AKIN TO CLIMBING EVEREST – IT'S AN UPHILL STRUGGLE AND VERY FEW PEOPLE MAKE IT, AS **DEBRA MEIBURG**, WHO WAS AWARDED THE COVETED TITLE LAST YEAR, EXPLAINS

IT'S BEEN CALLED THE WORLD'S MOST DIFFICULT exam, and although I've never sat the other contender, Oxford University's All Souls, I have to agree. Candidates spend years studying, open countless bottles of wine and traipse through hundreds of wine cellars in the quest to achieve the highest accolade in the wine profession: Master of Wine (MW). Considered by many to be the "PhD of wine," there are 277 Masters of Wine from 23 different countries, with only a handful attaining the title each year.

MASTER CLASS

ABOVE The writer receiving her certificate as a Master of Wine

Most students hoping to gain the MW title have already wended their way through university winemaking courses and diplomas offered by the well-regarded Wine and Spirit Education Trust, not to mention slogged through years of experience in the wine industry. Entry into the Institute of Masters of Wine's annual two-year education programme is the first and, in retrospect, the easiest hurdle.

As an applicant, I prepared an essay on an assigned topic, obtained references from two MWs and then awaited the daunting news. Upon acceptance, I wrote a cheque to attend a four-day orientation seminar, beginning the arduous, but exhilarating climb to MW base camp. After the



BOTTOMS UP

CLOCKWISE

FROM TOP LEFT Countless of bottles are sampled as a MW; MW Michael Broadbent, a tasting exam is part of the process; a hall set up for the gruelling taste test



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first-year assessment, students are left largely to their own devices until returning the following year(s) for mock exams and feedback. In the interim, students enthusiastically form tasting groups, draft – and redraft – elaborate study plans and begin shedding all other fun activities.

The Institute of Masters of Wine (IMW) is not an august bricks-and-mortar establishment. Instead, the institute is fashioned somewhat along the lines of an old English guild, comprised of a small administrative office governed by MWs, who volunteer to run the IMW's exams and programs. One of the key successes of the institute is its mentoring programme. Each student is assigned a MW, who reviews practice essays and tasting notes to

provide support and guidance. As students are expected to be wine experts before applying, the educational programme does not provide an actual wine curriculum. It's left up to you to ascertain your weaknesses (and to figure out how to fix them). An array of MWs – a who's who of the wine world – offer tips, guidance and advice on exam technique. This isn't as helpful as it might sound, however, as advice can be varied and contradictory as each MW speaks from his/her own exam experiences: imagine a roomful of Michelin-starred chefs telling you how to fry an egg.

To become a MW one must pass a gruelling three-part exam divided into practical, theory and dissertation. The practical, a punishing tasting exam, and theory exams are offered once per year and must be taken simultaneously. At 9am on three consecutive days in June in London, Sydney or San Francisco, jittery candidates face 12 mystery glasses of wine. Within two hours students are expected not only to identify the wines, but also to churn out 20-plus pages in answer to the examiners' questions. Though question formats vary, candidates are typically asked to identify the grape variety or blend, pinpoint the wine's origin, ascertain the winemaking techniques used, discuss the wine's quality, market



segment or ageing potential and identify its vintage. Every statement must be supported by evidence detected in the glass of wine.

Students are taught to think like a detective and write like a lawyer: arguments must be built and positions defended. Timing is tight and getting words to paper quickly enough is a challenge. For months before the exam, I pulled corks out of bottles and tasted a dozen wines with stopwatch in hand – all before my morning coffee. The exam features white wines the first day and red wines the second. On the third and final day, students are braced to expect any wine style, including sparkling, fortified, sweet, red and rosé.

After a quick sandwich, students lurch back into the exam room to be tested on their theoretical knowledge. The theory exam is spread over four days and involves the writing of 15 hand-aching essays. Day one focuses on vineyard establishment and grape growing; day two on winemaking; day three on the international business of wine (packaging, distribution, marketing, trends

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and regulations); and day four on current wine issues (alcoholism, wine and health, genetically modified vines, globalisation of wine, etc).

Students are only given three attempts within four years to pass at least one of the exams (and five within six to pass both), so the decision of when to sit them is not taken lightly. But after you've mastered these two, there's still one more peak to climb: the dissertation. Candidates can choose any wine-related topic approved by the examining body. My dissertation addressed the education needs for wine professionals in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

After passing all three segments successfully, candidates exuberantly sign an ethics agreement and then, at long last, are allowed to add those glorious initials to their name. A formal ceremony awarding the MW certificates is held each November in Vintners' Hall in London.

The MW was conceived to recognise the pinnacle in the wine trade and it's a title that unlocks cellar doors around the world. But it's principally an intellectual exercise, not a career move, and while there's plenty of global support, the programme is largely a solo trek. If you have a passion for wine, the stomach for repeated failure and the soul to keep trudging, this is the programme for you. As the late great mountaineer and explorer Edmund Hillary once said, "It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves." ■

CLASS ACT

FROM TOP MW vice-chairman Lynne Sherriff and chairman Josef Schuller; presentation of a MW certificate to a guild member at the Vintners' Hall, England; Schuller and Michael Davies from the Master of Vintners' Company present a certificate to Jeannie Cho Lee, the first Korean MW

