

# Sommelier Journal

## Guidelines for Writers

### Making Your Pitch

- Before sending us a proposal for an article, read through back issues of *Sommelier Journal* to get a better idea of our style and what we publish in our various departments. You can learn quite a bit by perusing our website at [www.sommelierjournal.com](http://www.sommelierjournal.com). If you plan to be a regular writer for us, you may want to consider subscribing, which will also give you full access to articles on the website.
- Before sending a proposal, make sure we haven't already covered that region or topic. Of course, any pitch will have a better chance at success if we can tell how it fits into our concept. Using the guidelines below and your impressions from past issues, let us know exactly what you're proposing: a Restaurant Spotlight, a regional overview, a Terroir article, etc.
- Remember our audience. *Sommelier Journal* is aimed at wine professionals; while some variance in knowledge should be expected, you should assume that the reader will have passed an introductory-level course in a program like the WSET or the Court of Master Sommeliers. Don't send a proposal geared toward a general consumer audience.
- Be as specific as possible. Show us that you already have extensive knowledge of the topic, and that you have conducted some initial research. Tell us how you intend to structure the article, using an outline or bullet points. Pretend we're the reader, and draw us into your subject with a bit of style. There is no limit on the number of proposals, but we generally prefer to consider one pitch at a time.
- Don't make us come up with ideas for you. Assignments are highly competitive, and it doesn't help your cause to write, "I'm going to Burgundy next week; do you need anything?" It's fine to inquire whether we have already covered or have any interest in a topic, but give us something to work with.
- Send your pitch by e-mail to Assistant Editor Rachel Zawila, [rachel@sommelierjournal.com](mailto:rachel@sommelierjournal.com). If you are new to us, please attach a resume or bio and some examples of similar work.

### After Your Proposal Is Accepted

- You will be asked to sign a letter of agreement detailing your assignment, deadline, and fees and turning over your copyright to *Sommelier Journal*. We cannot pay you until this agreement has been executed.
- If you have not written for us before, send a 50-to-100-word author bio to run with your article.
- Unless you are providing your own photos, send us contact information for people who might be able to supply images for your article (PR firm, marketing manager, etc.).
- *Sommelier Journal* does not cover travel expenses. Writers may accept travel from regional or national trade organizations, but not from individual producers. To avoid the expectation of a quid pro quo, use discretion in accepting meals or lodging from producers.

- We generally start editing in earnest about six weeks before the issue date. Expect us to follow up with fact-checking questions and requests for additional information. Please let us know if you will not be reachable for some period.
- Payment for your article will be made within 30 days of the issue date.

## **In General**

The following guidelines apply to all *Sommelier Journal* articles.

- Get your hands dirty. Delve into the details of what makes the subject successful: for restaurants, that means numbers (we are a trade magazine); for wineries, minute details of growing and winemaking. We can always delete material that is too esoteric, but we cannot reveal information that wasn't uncovered. Remembering that our primary audience works in the industry, err on the side of too much detail. Tell the reader something he or she doesn't already know.
- Use a feature-writing style, with a eye-catching lead, a logical progression of subject matter, and a conclusion.
- Show us the personality of the subject: the sommelier, restaurant or winery owner, or winemaker. The best articles leave the reader with the sense of having met the person being profiled. Similarly, the best articles on restaurants, wineries, or wine regions convey the personality of a place, usually through the owner or winemaker.
- As you write, keep in mind this question: What specific points will make the reader more successful as a sommelier or restaurateur? You may want to keep a list of "takeaways" for your own reference.

The following guidelines apply to specific departments as listed.

## **Sommelier Spotlight**

900 words

- Subjects of Sommelier Spotlights are prominent and unique wine professionals, primarily in the United States.
- At least one personal visit to the subject's restaurant is of critical importance to bring the reader into the story. Follow-up by telephone or e-mail is perfectly acceptable.
- In the article, provide enough background information to let readers understand how the subject reached his or her position in the wine world. This should include a brief work and education history, as well as important inflection points in the subject's life. In particular, why did this person get into the wine business, why did he or she want to become a sommelier, and how did that happen? Direct quotes and revealing anecdotes are essential.
- Be sure to include basic information on the subject's current restaurant, including its cuisine and wine philosophy. Quotes from the chef or other executives are often helpful.
- Questions to keep in mind from the reader's perspective: Why was this person chosen

out of the many possibilities to be spotlighted? What makes this subject an outstanding sommelier—knowledge, service, training, personality? What particular things does he or she do that stand apart from the pack?

- If possible, send the restaurant’s complete wine list in digital form, along with a suggestion on which section to excerpt for the article. This portion should help illuminate whatever points the subject makes about the restaurant’s wine philosophy.
- Include tasting notes by the sommelier on his or her “Five Favorites” from the restaurant’s current wine list. Include the vintage and list price of each bottle.
- Include the restaurant’s complete address, telephone, website, and pertinent contact information for follow-up.

## **Restaurant Spotlight**

900 words

- Subjects of Restaurant Spotlights are prominent and unique establishments with outstanding wine programs, primarily in the United States.
- At least one personal visit to the restaurant is of critical importance to bring the reader into the story. Follow-up by telephone or e-mail is perfectly acceptable.
- In the article, provide basic information on the restaurant, including founding partners, current ownership, history (any moves, name changes, sister locations), awards, and key staff.
- In contrast to a Sommelier Spotlight, a Restaurant Spotlight should focus on the owners. Be sure to detail their background, including a brief work history and major career inflection points. This discussion should cover food as well as wine. The wine director or sommelier should also be introduced, but background information should be more condensed than in a Sommelier Spotlight.
- Describe both the cuisine and the wine program, with particular emphasis on food-and-wine pairing, service, and training. Put the reader inside the decision-making process, especially regarding anything that makes the restaurant unique, and let the reader know how this plays out on the floor every day. Direct quotes and revealing anecdotes are essential.
- Questions to keep in mind from the reader’s perspective: Why was this restaurant chosen out of the many possibilities to be spotlighted? What makes this an outstanding restaurant—food, wine, service, staff? What particular things are done here that may stand apart from the pack?
- We will send you a template for a Fact Sheet to include with the article. Try to obtain as much of this numerical data as possible; it will be important to our readers.
- If possible, send the restaurant’s current menu and wine list in digital form, along with suggestions on which sections to excerpt for the article. These portions should help illuminate whatever points are made about the restaurant’s food-and-wine philosophy. Make sure both lists contain prices.
- Include the restaurant’s complete address, telephone, website, and pertinent contact information for follow-up.

## Winery Spotlight

900 words

- Subjects of Winery Spotlights are prominent and intriguing producers. Each issue usually spotlights one American and one international winery.
- At least one personal visit to the winery is of critical importance to bring the reader into the story. Follow-up by telephone or e-mail is perfectly acceptable.
- In the article, provide basic information on the winery's history, including any past owners or prominent winemakers, changes in growing or winemaking philosophies, major inflection points, and key staff.
- Describe the owners' education and work history, how and why they got into wine, and, if applicable, the impetus behind the start or purchase of the subject winery. Do the same for the winemaker and any other key staff. Direct quotes and revealing anecdotes are essential.
- Address the winery's location, vineyard sources, and growing conditions. Information on geography, soils, and viticulture should not be as detailed as in a Terroir article, but should not be ignored. Such material will be more important if the winery is in a relatively unknown region.
- Describe what the winery does in terms of either viticulture or winemaking to stand out. This may involve rootstocks, clonal selection, trellising, canopy management, organic/biodynamic practices, fermentation and aging, and blending. Focus on why particular wines are exceptional from a sommelier's standpoint.
- Include pertinent numbers on estate vineyard sizes, annual case production, and exports (if applicable).
- Include tasting notes on Outstanding Recent Releases (see section on tasting notes below). These should be key wines available to restaurants in the United States that you believe to be particularly noteworthy. You don't need to include everything the winery offers. Past vintages may be appropriate for collectible wines that are likely to be found in verticals on many restaurant wine lists. Include each wine's suggested retail price in U.S. dollars.
- Include the winery's complete address, telephone, website, and contact information for follow-up. If the winery is outside the United States, provide its importer's name, location, and website.

## Terroir

1,200 words

- Subjects of Terroir articles are notable and unique vineyard locations. These can range in size from an individual block to a well-defined subregion. In contrast to an Appellation subject, the site must be one that is recognized for having a distinct terroir, based on production of a limited number of grape varieties.
- At least one personal visit to the site is of critical importance to bring the reader into the story. Follow-up by telephone or e-mail is perfectly acceptable.
- In the article, provide basic information on the location's history, including any prominent past owners or producers and important changes over time. Detail the

current ownership, and supply pertinent numbers on vineyard acreage, varieties grown, and annual production.

- Compared to a Winery Spotlight, include much more detail on geography, climate, geology, soil, and any other factors that are important in creating the area's distinctiveness. Show how this relates to what's in the glass—in other words, what notes are the hallmarks of this terroir.
- Include information on important producers who make wines from the vineyard. Direct quotes from owners, winemakers, and vineyard managers are appropriate.
- Include tasting notes on Outstanding Recent Releases (see section on tasting notes below). These should be key wines available to restaurants in the United States that you believe to be particularly noteworthy. A comprehensive listing is not necessary. Past vintages may be appropriate for collectible wines that are likely to be found in verticals on many restaurant wine lists. Include each wine's suggested retail price in U.S. dollars.
- Include a list of Key Producers, with the complete address, telephone, website, and contact information for follow-up of any winery mentioned in the article. If the winery is outside the United States, provide its importer's name, location, and website.

## Appellation

1,200 words

- Subjects of Appellation articles are notable and unique geographic wine regions defined by regulation. These can range in size from a sub-sub-zone to a well-defined region; an entire country is probably too large.
- At least one personal visit to the appellation is of critical importance to bring the reader into the story. Follow-up by telephone or e-mail is perfectly acceptable.
- In the article, provide basic information on the appellation's history, including prominent producers and important political changes. Supply pertinent numbers on vineyard acreage, varieties grown, and annual production. A box of key grape varieties, including acreage and characteristics, may be helpful.
- Focus on how the appellation is defined by regulation, including geographic boundaries, categories of wine, allowed varieties and yields, etc. A box may be necessary.
- Compared to a Winery Spotlight, include more detail on geography, climate, geology, soil, and any other factors that are important in creating the area's distinctiveness. Show how this relates to what's in the glass—in other words, what notes are the hallmarks of this appellation. Such material will be more general than in a Terroir article.
- Include information on important producers that make wines from this appellation. Describe different winemaking styles and how they are expressed in the wines of the region. Direct quotes from owners and winemakers are appropriate. This material will be more condensed than in a regional overview.
- Include tasting notes on Outstanding Recent Releases (see section on tasting notes below). These should be key wines available to restaurants in the United States that you believe to be particularly noteworthy. A comprehensive listing is not necessary. Include each wine's suggested retail price in U.S. dollars.
- Include a list of Key Producers, with the complete address, telephone, website, and

contact information for follow-up of any winery mentioned in the article. If the winery is outside the United States, provide its importer's name, location, and website.

## Regional Overview

1,800 words

- A regional overview is a feature article covering a notable wine region. These can range in size from a subregion of a well-known wine-producing country to an entire lesser-known country.
- Assignments will be based on demonstrated expertise in the area. More than one personal visit may be required to provide a comprehensive overview. Follow-up by telephone or e-mail is perfectly acceptable.
- In the article, describe the region's history, including prominent wine producers and important political and cultural changes. Provide information on current wine regulations, including geographic boundaries, categories of wine, allowed varieties and yields, etc. A box may be necessary.
- Describe how geography, climate, geology, soil, and any other factors are important in creating the area's distinctiveness. Show how this relates to what's in the glass—in other words, what notes are the hallmarks of this region.
- Supply pertinent numbers on vineyard acreage, varieties grown, and annual production. A box of key grape varieties, including acreage and characteristics, may be helpful.
- If appropriate, divide the article into subregions or appellations. Include information on important producers, describing different winemaking styles and how they are expressed in the wines of the region. Direct quotes from producers, winemakers, importers, and other local experts are essential.
- Include a section on the cuisine of the area and how it relates to the local wines. Especially for an unfamiliar region, focus on how its wines can be used on American restaurant lists. Quotes from local or American restaurateurs and sommeliers may be appropriate.
- Include tasting notes on Outstanding Recent Releases (see section on tasting notes below). These should be key wines available to restaurants in the United States that you believe to be particularly noteworthy. The listing should be more thorough than in a Winery Spotlight or a Terroir or Appellation article. Include each wine's suggested retail price in U.S. dollars.
- Include a list of Key Producers, with the complete address, telephone, website, and contact information for follow-up of any winery mentioned in the article. If the winery is outside the United States, provide its importer's name, location, and website.

## Special Report

1,500 words

- A Special Report is a feature article covering a particular aspect of a well-known wine region. The focus may be a category of wine, a vintage or vintages, or noteworthy geographic or political developments.
- Assignments will be based on demonstrated expertise in the subject matter. More than

one personal visit may be required to write a comprehensive article. Follow-up by telephone or e-mail is perfectly acceptable.

- In the article, provide some background on why a report on this subject is important to our audience, including historical, geographic, political, or viticultural information as appropriate.
- Divide the article according to subregions, wine styles, or other logical categories. Information similar to that provided for a Terroir or Appellation article or a regional overview may be needed. Direct quotes from producers, winemakers, importers, or other experts are appropriate.
- Focus on the impact of this topic on American restaurants, especially from a wine buyer's standpoint. Include information on food-and-wine pairing if applicable. Quotes from restaurateurs and sommeliers may be helpful.
- The reader must be able to take away specific dollars-and-cents advice that will make his or her business more successful.
- If appropriate, include tasting notes on Outstanding Recent Releases (see section on tasting notes below). These should be key wines available to restaurants in the United States that you believe to be particularly noteworthy, focusing on the vintages or categories being covered in the article. Include each wine's suggested retail price in U.S. dollars.
- If appropriate, include a list of Key Producers, with the complete address, telephone, website, and contact information for follow-up of any winery mentioned in the article. If the winery is outside the United States, provide its importer's name, location, and website.

### **Other features**

1,800 words

- Feature articles are encouraged on trends in the wine industry. Topics may include wine education, restaurant management, staff training, service, equipment, business management, and economic or political developments.
- In the article, provide some background on why this subject is important to our audience, establishing your expertise as an author.
- Divide the article according to region or other logical category. Direct quotes from educators, restaurateurs, sommeliers, manufacturers, or other experts are appropriate.
- Focus on the impact of this topic on American restaurants, especially from a wine buyer's standpoint. The reader must be able to take away specific dollars-and-cents advice that will make his or her business more successful.
- Include sidebars or graphs as necessary to illustrate the material in the text.
- If appropriate, include a list of institutions or manufacturers, with the complete address, telephone, website, and contact information for follow-up of any company mentioned in the article. Also provide follow-up information for any experts prominently quoted in the article.

## Interview

2,500-3,000 words

- Interview subjects are prominent figures in the wine industry, including producers, winemakers, importers, sommeliers, and restaurateurs.
- Before conducting an interview, check with us for suggestions on potential questions that would be meaningful to our audience. It might be helpful to send questions to the subject in advance for consideration.
- Our interviews are always conducted in person, although follow-up by phone or e-mail is perfectly acceptable. Be sure to use a reliable voice recorder so you can transcribe the conversation later.
- Ask the subject questions about what he or she does that is different or remarkable, focusing on why this person has been successful: we're looking for nitty-gritty details and revealing anecdotes. For a producer or winemaker, detailed discussions of viticultural and winemaking techniques are welcome. For a sommelier or restaurateur, behind-the-curtain insights into training, tasting, cellar management, list construction, and other business details are wanted, including hard numbers. For other industry figures, similar business details are welcome. Answer the question: What makes this person worth an interview and worth a reader's time?
- Start the article with an introduction that provides basic background information on how the subject reached his or her position in the wine world. Set the stage for the interview by describing when and where you talked to the subject.
- In the text, you may modify your questions to fit the answers, but the responses should be verbatim (within grammatical parameters). Let the personality of your subject shine through—answers should reflect the way the subject speaks. Condense or rearrange the answers as necessary to provide a more logical and readable flow.
- Include a listing of the company's product lines or distributors by state if applicable.
- After editing, we will send you a proof of the interview to forward to the subject. He or she should carefully check the responses for accuracy and respond to any requests for follow-up information. Note that time may be of the essence as we prepare the issue for printing.

## Tasting Panel

1,200-1,800 words.

- A Tasting Panel can involve a single vintage of a particular region (such as 1996 Médoc), a comparison of two vintages (1990 and 1994 Barolo), a regional overview of current releases (Australian Chardonnay), or occasionally a vertical of a distinguished winery (Château Musar). Be sure to check what has previously been covered before making a proposal.
- If you are assigned to write a Tasting Panel, you will need to coordinate closely with us to ensure that it is conducted according to our policies. *Sommelier Journal* must approve all panelists and wines to be tasted in advance. Depending on the subject of the tasting, we will help obtain the wines and pay for them if necessary.
- The tasting is usually held at a restaurant. A quiet room with ample table space and

appropriate glassware is required; we will work with the restaurant staff to make sure everything is set up properly. If you are scoring the wines (as opposed to simply moderating), you must be sure they are not revealed to you in advance. When time permits, we generally offer to buy dinner for the panelists after the tasting as a thank-you to both them and the restaurant.

- Wines are always tasted blind in a controlled setting. They can be divided into flights (by age, style, or origin, or in random order), but no discussion should take place until all wines have been tasted and the panelists have turned in their scores. Our “scoresheets” must be used to rank the wines on a 20-point scale. Panelists should not write their names on the scoresheets, but may want to record their scores in their own notes for later reference.
- Be sure to record the discussion on a reliable voice recorder; this conversation is the most important part of the Tasting Panel. Ask for general opinions first, then go through the wines in order. It helps in transcribing the recording if you follow the same order around the table, starting with the next person so a different panelist can go first on each wine.
- After the discussion, reveal the wines (it’s useful to have a numbered sheet to hand out at the end). You may tell the panelists the total scores if you have time to add them up, but remind them that our statistical analysis may result in a slightly different final order.
- Make sure to collect contact information for each panelist, including name, certifications, job title, and employer as they are to be listed in the article. Let them know we will be sending a proof to each panelist before publication so they can check the accuracy of their quotes, and make sure we have e-mail addresses for this purpose. Note that time may be of the essence as we prepare the issue for printing.
- Send the scores to Phil Vogels, phil@sommelierjournal.com, as soon as possible after the tasting. He will run the analysis and let you know the order of ranking.
- Begin the article by setting the scene and listing the panelists alphabetically, with titles and places of employment. Let the reader know the purpose of the tasting, including brief geographic information if necessary, then summarize the panel’s general opinions using direct quotes.
- Write about the individual wines in the order of the overall ranking. Begin with a one-to-three sentence description of each wine, followed by representative comments from the panel. Each comment should be preceded by the panelist’s last name; do not use quotation marks or attribution in this section. Comments should be listed in a logical order, not necessarily the order in which they were made. Be sure that both positive and negative viewpoints are represented. Do not overuse any one or two panelists; try to roughly equalize the number of quotes for each participant so that all voices are heard.

## Tasting Notes

Any tasting notes written for *Sommelier Journal* should reflect your own style. The following is by no means a prescriptive checklist, but covers points that we’d like you to keep in mind as you write your notes. Remember our audience: wine professionals who work primarily in the

restaurant industry. These are experienced tasters who will not be impressed by vague generalities.

#### General considerations:

- Wines do not need to be tasted blind except in Tasting Panels. Still, your tastings should always be conducted professionally, in appropriate settings.
- You should not need to purchase wines for tastings. Producers, importers, and regional associations are usually delighted to provide samples; let us know if you need help obtaining wines for an article.
- *Sommelier Journal* does not use a scoring system except in Tasting Panels. Omit any scores or references to scores from your notes.
- Wines must be available in the United States, with rare exceptions. If our subscribers can't obtain the wine, publishing a tasting note on it may be more frustrating than helpful.
- Organize your notes by logical category (subregion, variety, etc.). Within each category, list the wines alphabetically by producer.
- Use the following format for the wine name: [Producer] [Variety] [Subregion] [Vineyard or Proprietary Name], [Appellation] TAB [Vintage] TAB [\$suggested retail price in U.S. dollars].

#### Writing tips:

- For notes that aren't part of an article on a region or winery, a brief (one-sentence) background on the vineyard or producer will be helpful to the reader.
- Include pertinent information on the blend, oak regime, alcohol level, or other technical facts at the beginning of the note. The *cépage* is the most important detail; otherwise, mention only data that are unique to this bottling or critical to the identity of the wine.
- Colorful, idiosyncratic notes are not forbidden and can sometimes be fun, but don't include descriptors that will be meaningless to the average reader, such as personal smells or life experiences.
- Describe the color of the wine unless it is completely unremarkable.
- Describe the nose and the palate, including fruit, earth, and wood, but try to avoid shopping lists of descriptors.
- Stay away from ungrounded scales such as medium-plus and medium-minus.
- Focus on balance and structure, including texture, acidity, minerality, tannins, oak, and residual sugar. Is anything out of whack, such as the alcohol level?
- Detail any flaws or special factors that affect the way the wine presents itself, including departures from traditional winemaking style.
- Tell us about the complexity of the wine—does it hold from attack to finish?
- Tell us about the finish—short or long? What lasting impressions are left?
- Tell us how you think the wine will age and whether it should be consumed now or cellared.
- Include recommended food pairings only if they may be unusual for the wine's style, variety, or producer. Our readers have enough experience to design their own pairings based on your description.

- Finally, give the reader an evaluation of the wine's quality. Many notes get bogged down in descriptors and fail to deliver on their basic purpose: telling us whether you liked the wine, and why.