

GET CERTIFIED

TIM GAISER, MS

So you want to be a sommelier?

If we are to believe the press, the United States has finally become a wine-drinking nation. A Gallup poll conducted in 2005 found that, for the first time, more people preferred to drink wine than those who preferred beer or spirits. Although beer regained a slight lead in this year's poll, I've still noticed a greatly increased public awareness of the role of the sommelier over the past few years. That much-caricatured snotty, condescending wine steward with the tastevin dangling from an Ichabod Crane neck has been replaced by a younger generation of enthusiastic sommeliers—both men and women—focused on creating world-class wine lists that balance bread-and-butter brands with eclectic, hand-sold bottles. Articles in national lifestyle and trade magazines now commonly feature the top sommeliers in the country, posing in the vast cellars of beautifully appointed restaurants.

As glamorous as the profession of sommelier may have become, however, the actual requirements for being a good or even great sommelier have never really changed—even considering the dizzying pace of change in the wine world.

It's a fascinating and unusual mix of skills that not everyone possesses.

Tasting: It almost goes without saying that a good sommelier has an accomplished palate, is an excellent blind taster, and can spot common and not-so-common wine flaws at 50 paces.

Theory: Knowledge of the major wine regions and even the lesser-known regions, depending on the specific restaurant and wine program, is a given, but a good sommelier absolutely must be able to speak intelligently of any product in the beverage program—and that includes spirits, beers, waters, and even coffee and tea.

Communication skills: A sommelier's life, and to a great extent income, are made or lost at the table. One thing that sets the sommelier apart from practically every other professional in the wine industry is the intense one-on-one interaction with the customer. After all, a sommelier's job, in the end, is to get every guest the best possible bottle or glass of wine that will match perfectly with a given menu selection. Communication skills also extend to staff training, which is a never-ending process considering the high turnover in most restaurants.

Service: Although it's the make-or-break factor

Tim Gaiser is Education Chair for the American Chapter of the Court of Master Sommeliers and an adjunct professor at the Rudd Center for Professional Wine Studies of the Culinary Institute of America. A frequent contributor to wine and food magazines, he has worked in all sectors of the wine industry.





Classroom facilities at the Professional Culinary Institute in Campbell, Calif.

Photo by Daniel Korb

for any sommelier, proper wine service is not rocket science, despite how often it is incorrectly, even tragically, performed. A top sommelier can move elegantly on the floor, can seamlessly open a bottle of Champagne while fielding questions about the menu from the table, can decant an older bottle of red with the toughest cork without breaking a sweat, and can offer suggestions about which wine/spirit/beer will accompany any point of the meal—and at multiple price options.

Number-crunching: Off the floor, the sommelier must have the ability to build and maintain a wine inventory that may veer into six-figure dollar amounts, with a keen eye toward margins, finding the best wine values, and balancing the mix of “brands” vs. hand-sold items.

Grunt factor: This is the side of being a sommelier that never gets any press—the long hours (commonly more than 60 a week) spent shagging boxes of wine, stocking, restocking, and moving inventory. In short, a hell of a lot of lifting.

With so many people now vitally interested in the sommelier profession, where does one get the necessary education and experience? In Europe, hotel schools have included wine studies curricula for decades. Not so here in the United States. Until recently, wine programs were the exclusive trade of the major hospitality schools, such as the Culinary Institute of America and Johnson & Wales University. And sommelier experience could be gained only by putting in time on the floor as a runner or server at a top-flight restaurant, before climbing the ladder to get a shot at the wine list.

All that has completely changed within the last five years. Any would-be sommelier now has multiple options in terms of educational programs, which are given year-round all over the country. These offerings range from one- or two-day seminars to rigorous multiyear curricula. The following is a sampling of the best educational programs now available for the aspiring sommelier.

BACKGROUND	BEST PRACTICES	CLASSES AND EXAMINATIONS
COURT OF MASTER SOMMELIERS		
<p>Founded in 1977 in Torquay, England; American chapter formed in 1987. The Master Sommelier (MS) diploma is the only internationally recognized sommelier title and one of only two international wine titles, along with Master of Wine (MW). Only 156 individuals have passed the MS examination since its inception in 1969; there are currently 129 Master Sommeliers, 82 in the U.S. or Canada and the rest in Europe, primarily the U.K.</p>	<p>Focused lectures and tastings are taught by Master Sommeliers in preparation for various levels of examinations. Classes are conducted at hotels and culinary schools throughout North America. Website: www.mastersommeliers.org.</p>	<p>Introductory Sommelier Course: Two-day survey covering all the world's major wine regions, spirits, and proper wine service. The Deductive Tasting Method, used in the Court's tasting examinations, is demonstrated in multiple tastings throughout the course. To pass, a student must score a minimum of 60% on a 70-question written theory test taken from material given in the lectures.</p> <p>Certified Sommelier Examination: Relatively new examination added in 2006. Given in one day, it consists of a written theory exam, a written blind tasting of two wines, and a service test. A student must score a minimum of 60% on each of the three parts to pass.</p> <p>Advanced Sommelier Course and Examination: Five-day course including three days of intensive lectures and tastings and two days of testing. The examination consists of a written theory test, a blind tasting of six wines, and a service examination. A student must score a minimum of 60% on each of the three parts to pass.</p> <p>Master Sommelier Examination: Three-day examination that also includes theory, tasting, and service components. Unlike the Advanced exam, this one is entirely oral, and the degree of difficulty is markedly higher. A student must achieve a minimum 75% score on each of the three parts to earn the diploma, but is allowed three successive attempts to pass any part of the examination. While the Introductory Course and Certified Sommelier Examination serve to educate, train, and examine a wide range of students in the hospitality industry, the Advanced Course and Master Sommelier Examination are specifically geared to train and examine sommeliers at the highest level. Therefore, the pass rate is only about 30% for the Advanced Course and 5-10% for the Master's exam.</p>
WINE & SPIRIT EDUCATION TRUST		
<p>Founded in 1969 to serve as the major educational vehicle for the wine and spirits trade in the U.K., the WSET is now a prerequisite for the Master of Wine curriculum.</p>	<p>Focused varietal and regional tastings backed by lectures from industry professionals. Classes are conducted at select locations in the U.K. and the U.S., including COPIA in Napa and the International Wine Center in New York. Website: www.wset.co.uk.</p>	<p>Intermediate Certificate: Eight two-hour evening sessions followed by an evening, one-hour, 50-question multiple choice examination. The entire course can also be completed in three full days of study, including the exam. Designed as vocational training for those with little previous background in the wine and spirits industry, the course covers basic tasting techniques, grape varietal identification, and major wine regions.</p> <p>Advanced Certificate: Fourteen two-hour evening sessions plus a two-hour evening examination. The course can also be completed in five full days of study, including the exam. Building on material introduced at the intermediate level, it covers major wine regions in more depth, with an emphasis on viticulture, vinification, and wine styles.</p> <p>Diploma in Wines and Spirits: A two-year program intended for individuals who need a detailed, contemporary knowledge of the production and commercial significance of the wines and spirits of the world. Each year comprises 18-20 three-hour class sessions. The course is currently under revision; the new version will include a final assessment similar to a dissertation. Topics covered in the course include focused work on viticulture and vinification, as well as a breakdown of the major wine regions and their legislative requirements.</p>

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PROFESSIONAL CULINARY INSTITUTE		
<p>The PCI opened its doors in late 2006 in Campbell, Calif., near San Jose. A full culinary program is augmented by an 11-week Certified Sommelier program, directed by David Glancy, MS.</p>	<p>Small class sizes and intensive, hands-on coaching in a new, state-of-the-art classroom. Website: www.pcichef.com.</p>	<p>The program is organized into eight concise modules: Wine Foundation; Wines of France; New World Wine Regions; Wines of Italy; Wines of the Iberian Peninsula; Wines of Germany and Eastern Europe; Beers, Spirits, and Cigars; and Wine Program Management. Classroom sessions include lectures, hands-on service training, themed and blind wine tastings, and chef- and sommelier-taught food-pairing classes. Each course culminates in the two-day Master Sommelier Introductory Course and one-day Certified Sommelier Examination.</p>
RUDD CENTER FOR PROFESSIONAL WINE STUDIES		
<p>Part of the Culinary Institute of America's Greystone campus in St. Helena, Calif. (formerly the historic Christian Brothers winery), this center was built with funds donated by Napa Valley winery owner and entrepreneur Leslie Rudd. It opened in spring 2003 under the leadership of wine educator and journalist Karen MacNeil.</p>	<p>Focused curriculum taught by top industry professionals in two state-of-the-art, theater-style classrooms. Introductory classes include vineyard tours and guided tastings at Northern California wineries. Website: www.ciaprochef.com.</p>	<p>One- to five-day classes are offered regularly on subjects including sensory analysis, food-and-wine pairing, wine business, and regional "intensives." Twice a year, these are grouped into five-week "Wine Immersion" programs geared toward students who wish to pursue one of the school's two credentials.</p> <p>Certified Wine Professional Foundation Level I (CWP): Half-day examination, offered at the end of each Wine Immersion, involving a multiple-choice test and a blind tasting of three wines.</p> <p>Certified Wine Professional Advanced Level II (ACWP): Two-day exam given once a year. It includes a written test and nine different blind tastings, some involving food. A one-day preparatory class is offered just before each exam. The CWP certificate is recommended, but is not a prerequisite for the ACWP.</p>

Students at the Professional Culinary Institute.



Photo by Daniel Korb

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INSTITUTE OF MASTERS OF WINE		
<p>Based in London, the non-profit Institute of Masters of Wine was founded in 1955 to promote the highest level of education in the wine industry. The first MW examination was given in 1953, with six students passing. Although the credential was limited to members of the British wine trade for 30 years, it was opened to others in the 1980s. There are now 265 Masters of Wine in more than 20 countries.</p>	<p>Tastings, classes, and other wine events offered throughout the world, culminating in the legendarily difficult Master of Wine examination. Website: www.masters-of-wine.org.</p>	<p>Admission to the MW program is by application only. The Advanced Certificate from the WSET is a requirement, although comparable qualification may be accepted. The IMW curriculum is based on self-study, with a mentor assigned after the first year. Students are expected to demonstrate a high degree of knowledge on a wide range of wine-related subjects, including viticulture, winemaking, and all commercial aspects of the industry.</p> <p>First Year Education Program: Introduction to the MW syllabus, with MWs and other industry specialists lecturing on issues that may be included in the exam. Advice is also given on preparing a study plan, setting a timetable, assembling information, making field visits, developing essay skills, and acquiring an analytical tasting approach.</p> <p>First Year Assessment: Theory paper and written practical tasting paper, completed at the end of the first year. The assessment is graded by a panel of MWs to determine whether the student is ready to advance.</p> <p>Second Year Education Program: Similar in format to the first-year program, but with more emphasis on examination techniques, question interpretation, and tasting workshops. Feedback is provided on the student's progress.</p> <p>Master of Wine Examination: Divided into three parts. A theory section comprises four three-hour written papers on viticulture, winemaking, the business of wine, and other contemporary issues. The practical section consists of three 12-wine blind tastings, including an assessment of grape variety, origin, quality, and style. The dissertation requires the student to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of a wine-related topic of his or her choice, preferably connected to the student's career path.</p>
AMERICAN SOMMELIER ASSOCIATION		
<p>A non-profit organization based in New York, the ASA is devoted to educating both consumers and members of the wine industry. Local chapters throughout the country offer various wine-based classes, tastings, and social events. The ASA also administers the Best Sommelier in America competition.</p>	<p>Classes at three levels offered in New York for wine professionals. Website: www.americansommelier.org.</p>	<p>Foundation Course: Eight-week program designed to provide a balanced introduction to the major wine styles and regions. It includes basic training in wine tasting as well as key features of labeling laws, grape varieties, viticulture, and vinification.</p> <p>Viticulture and Vinification Course: Offered over 24 weekly morning or evening sessions. It covers winegrowing, winemaking, and wine regions on a more in-depth level and is recommended for professionals in the wine and hospitality industry. The course also introduces beer, spirits, service, and blind-tasting techniques. The Foundation Course, or comparable study, is a prerequisite.</p> <p>Advanced Blind Tasting Course: A 15-week course that takes an in-depth look at classic grape varieties and wine styles through extensive blind tastings.</p>
NEW YORK WINE & CULINARY CENTER		
<p>This newly opened, 20,000-square-foot facility was built in Canandaigua, N.Y., to allow both consumers and wine professionals to experience the wines and foods of New York.</p>	<p>Focused classes and tastings for consumers, along with WSET classes offered by certified instructors. Website: www.nywcc.com.</p>	<p>While the center's focus is on culinary programs, the Foundation and Intermediate classes for the WSET are offered, along with a full slate of weekend consumer classes and tastings.</p>

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NAPA VALLEY COLLEGE		
<p>This Napa-based school, on a 160-acre site overlooking the Napa River, offers one- and two-year programs in viticulture, winery technology, and wine marketing and sales.</p>	<p>Courses designed to groom students for entry-level positions or to help them advance in their careers. Program instructors are experienced wine-industry professionals. Facilities include classroom and laboratory buildings, vineyards, and a teaching winery. Website: www.napavalley.edu.</p>	<p>The college offers a variety of options for wine professionals. One-year certificate programs in Viticulture and Winery Technology or Wine Marketing and Sales are intended to prepare students for careers in the North Coast wine industry.</p> <p>Students in the two-year Associate of Science program specialize in the fields of viticulture, winemaking, or wine marketing and sales. The AS program includes general education, basic science, and core courses in the degree option. It typically takes two to three years, with a minimum C grade level in all classes, to complete a degree.</p>
INTERNATIONAL WINE CENTER		
<p>This year marks the 25th anniversary of the IWC, which in 1994 became the first organization in the U.S. to become affiliated with the WSET, and in 2003 became the WSET's U.S. headquarters. The center is on Seventh Avenue between 29th and 30th streets in Manhattan, but classes are also conducted in other locations in New York City, as well as in New Jersey and Connecticut.</p>	<p>WSET-based program headed by internationally known educator and writer Mary Ewing-Mulligan, MW, CWE, and taught by top educators from the wine industry. Website: www.internationalwinecenter.com.</p>	<p>More than 800 students a year attend classes at the IWC; to date, more than 100 professionals have received the Diploma in Wines and Spirits through the center. Online classes are also offered, and a Spanish-language Intermediate Certificate course was given for the first time this year.</p>

Student evaluating color at the CIA Rudd Center.



President Mary-Ewing Mulligan, MW, CWE, and Director Linda Lawry, DWS, CWE, at New York's International Wine Center.



BACKGROUND	BEST PRACTICES	CLASSES AND EXAMINATIONS
INTERNATIONAL SOMMELIER GUILD		
<p>Founded in 1982, the ISG is the only wine-and-spirits educational body licensed by various state boards of higher education. Basic wine classes are offered, as well as a full curriculum of wine courses on four levels.</p>	<p>Focused, intensive training by leading industry educators, restaurateurs, wine merchants, wine-makers, and writers, offered at more than 40 satellite facilities across North America, with plans for classes in countries such as China, Australia, and India. Website: www.internationalsommelier.com.</p>	<p><i>Wine Fundamentals I:</i> Introductory course for the wine enthusiast given over eight three-hour sessions. Topics include sensory evaluation, major grape varieties, basic wine terminology, label information, appellation concepts, and basic wine service. The course is a prerequisite for Wine Fundamentals II.</p> <p><i>Wine Fundamentals II:</i> Offered over 16 three-hour sessions. It covers viticulture, vinification, regional appellation laws, advanced wine service, food and wine pairing, and proper storage and wine management. A minimum score of 70% must be achieved on three written examinations, which include short essays. Wine Fundamentals II is a prerequisite for the Sommelier Diploma Program.</p> <p><i>Sommelier Diploma Program:</i> Intensive six-month course, given weekly in eight-hour sessions. Designed as a benchmark for wine knowledge in the hospitality industry, the program covers viticulture, vinification, tasting techniques, proper cellaring, wine investment strategies, menu and wine-list design, and regional analysis of wines, spirits, and beers. A minimum score of 70% must be achieved on the six examination components, which include longer essays.</p> <p><i>International Grand Sommelier Masters Degree:</i> Graduate-level program based on a 24-week curriculum. To achieve the GSM, an applicant must successfully complete five elective courses and one mandatory course from a field of 24 specializations within seven years. The five-part, 12½-hour examination includes theory, tasting, and service components.</p>
SOCIETY OF WINE EDUCATORS		
<p>Founded in 1977, this non-profit organization is dedicated to raising the level of knowledge among wine educators, consumers, and professionals in all facets of the industry. SWE members include educators offering private wine classes and tastings; wine instructors in public and private colleges; culinary school faculty and students; wine producers, importers, distributors, and retailers; restaurateurs and hoteliers; and wine consultants, writers, and consumers.</p>	<p>Well-structured curriculum culminating in two highly regarded professional certifications. Classes are given around the country by SWE-certified instructors. Website: www.societyofwineeducators.org.</p>	<p><i>Certified Specialist of Wine (CSW):</i> One-hour examination consisting of 100 multiple-choice questions, 75 of which must be answered correctly to pass. This program, established by a team of recognized wine educators, is designed to impart a high level of wine-related knowledge.</p> <p><i>Certified Wine Educator (CWE):</i> Advanced certification acknowledging an exceptional standard of wine knowledge and tasting proficiency. The four-hour examination has three components: a written examination comprising 85 multiple-choice questions and one essay question, with a minimum passing score of 80%; a sensory evaluation that requires matching a set of eight classic varietal wines or blends against a supplied list of 10 possibilities, with at least six of eight correct identifications required to pass; and another sensory exercise in which students must identify heightened levels of standard wine components and chemical imbalances, with at least six of eight correct identifications required to pass.</p>

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Photos by Michael Grabner

Antonio Coppola, ACWP, focusing on a tasting exercise at the CIA Rudd Center.

As this article demonstrates, there has never been a better time to pursue a wine career, in view of the educational opportunities now available in the United States. Here are some recommendations to help narrow the choices.

The courses and curricula offered by the Court of Master Sommeliers, the International Sommelier Guild, and the American Sommelier Association should all be of interest to the budding sommelier. In particular, the MS Introductory Course and the ISG's Wine Fundamentals I and II provide good entrance points for anyone who is interested in becoming a sommelier without committing a great deal of time and money. Both organizations then offer advanced-level progressions, culminating in either the MS title or the ISG's International

Grand Sommelier Masters Degree.

For a more in-depth education in a short period, the Professional Culinary Institute's 10-week Certified Sommelier course and the Rudd Center's five-week Wine Immersion are two of the best wine-intensive programs in the country. Both, however, are costly in terms of fees and living expenses.

An established sommelier who is looking to build a long-term career and professional recognition may want to take the challenge of either the MS or the MW examination. It is important to note again that these two titles are specialized, with the MS geared toward the hospitality industry and the MW toward writing and wine-making. Both require years of preparation, with no guarantee of passing.

For the serious wine lover who doesn't necessarily want to enter the hospitality industry, the Society of Wine Educators offers a well-structured curriculum and two accreditations that are worthy of consideration by any wine professional. The Wine & Spirit Education Trust is an internationally recognized organization with an excellent multitiered program that will be especially attractive to those interested in pursuing the MW title. Programs of both organizations are offered at various locations around the country. 🍷

Culinary Institute of America's Greystone campus in the historic Christian Brothers winery, St. Helena, Calif.

