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FEEDBACK

Raise your glass to a career in wine

May 15 2008

By Mari Kane

There are two pours of red wine in front of me, and I've been instructed to figure out if they are from Italy or France, as well as their vinicultural appellation and the varietals used. Oh, and if possible, the producers' names. At my table, I suggest they are Tuscan, one an entry-level Chianti, the other a fine Brunello. I'm called upon to identify them and I say "Chianti." Honk! Another table shouts "Valpolicella!" and, with a pull of an identity-concealing bottle bag, the instructor affirms their answer. Ding, ding, ding!



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Our ever-growing interest in viniculture has opened up a world of opportunities

Talk about humbling. This is a typical night at wine school, where every class is a challenge for the palette and the brain — sort of a cross between Top Chef and Jeopardy!

Around the world, wine has never been more popular than now, thanks to an ever-expanding selection of labels, many of them affordable to the average working Joe. And while boomers continue to drive high-end sales, '80s-born "millennials" have gotten into

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wine like no generation before them. Regan Sheehy, communications director at the Washington Wine Center, has referred to this trend as the "Starbucks effect," in which people accustomed to ordering complex coffee drinks are similarly embracing the myriad new wines on store shelves. Additionally, the advent of cute and funny critter-bedecked labels that contradict a time-honoured image problem have helped to make wine appear more fun, less stodgy. Furthermore, young culture vultures can now display their devotion to Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, KISS, Madonna and the Rolling Stones through their purchase of celebrity labels.

"Every year, the world is drinking about one per cent more volume," says Robert Beynat, chief executive of VinExpo, the world's largest and most prestigious wine trade show, held each year in Bordeaux and Hong Kong. "The value is rising twice as fast as the volume."

So, with increasing numbers of people — young and old — buying more bottles, the global wine market is enjoying an upswing that has fueled unprecedented opportunities for wine professionals.

All this industry growth is proving to be good for wine schools, too, says Barbara Philip, a wine educator and Canada's first female Master of Wine — a distinction so difficult to acquire that there are only 260 in the world. After passing a four-level diploma course, Master of Wine candidates must write three four-hour papers on wine theory, pass three 12-wine blind tastings to identify variety, origin, quality and style, and write a 10,000-word dissertation on a self-chosen subject. Philip wrote about Pinot Blanc as a signature wine for the Okanagan Valley.

"Increasing availability is stimulating curiosity in consumers, and then they're coming to wine class," Philip says. "It's a very direct effect."

To work up from the bottom of today's wine-industry barrel and into management or marketing, she says credentials are essential, and can mean the difference between working as a retail clerk and being a retail buyer. "Employers are really looking for certification, even from people with reputations in the industry. It just makes hiring easy. If I can look at a resume and see ISG [International Sommelier Guild] or WSET [Wine and Spirit Education Trust] courses, I know exactly where someone's wine knowledge is."

To be successful in wine school, Philip believes one needs to be passionate about the subject, have insatiable curiosity, and be very organized. "In the Master of Wine study, you need a broad understanding of wine and the technology of growing grapes, as well as the business and finance of wine," she says.

"So, you have to dedicate yourself to studying parts you aren't so passionate about."

Learning about wine also means brushing up on languages like French, Italian, German and Spanish, since half the world's labels are non-English. Another thing that Barbara and her partner, Iain Philip, recommend is to check one's preconceived notions at the classroom door. "Some people come in with an agenda of confirming their understanding of the wine world so they can tell their friends and family they were right all along," Iain says. "Successful students come into class with an open mind, and if

they're excited about wine, they'll do well." He estimates that 35 per cent of the people who enter wine school for personal reasons end up exploring the industry.

In Vancouver, there are two recognized wine-education programs: the Canada-based International Sommelier Guild and the U.K.-based Wine and Spirit Education Trust. Both offer five levels of study, the top being Master of Wine. The time it takes to complete levels one through four depends on the student's schedule and financial wherewithal. In Philip's case, the MW course alone took three and a half years to complete. The WSET program is taught at UBC Robson Square, as well as the Granville Street location of the Art Institute of Vancouver. Vancouver Community College teaches the ISG program at its downtown campus. "If you're choosing one of those, you can't go wrong," says Barbara, who has taught both programs. "Both are excellent and have a high calibre of teachers."

The programs offer equivalent instruction up to level two, but their emphasis diverges at the higher levels. "ISG has a restaurant focus, where you learn how to serve a table with comfort, develop a wine list, and do all the costing," Barbara explains. "WSET, at its highest levels, has a more business focus in the wine trade, like importing and retail."

She suggests that people who are interested in beginner courses should pick either of them based on their schedule.

Courses at the upper levels of wine school are definitely taught to the test; that is, aimed at topics that will appear on the final exams. Fortunately, instructors have ways of promoting success, to the benefit of good listeners. At the cavernous Robson Square campus, Master of Wine-to-be James Cluer lectured on wine-making and inserted the word "question" to signal a point that might be found on the exam.

At the Art Institute's WSET program, Barbara coaches students to use deductive reasoning as a method of eliminating comparable wines in a blind tasting. "Looking at a problem, you can have three different answers, and can get points even when you are incorrect," she says.

At a recent ISG-diploma class at Vancouver Community College, the class was dominated by young waiters who brought an energetic, freshman-like vibe to the subject. Group projects are required, my table neighbour told me, and the groups meet regularly to study and taste wine together. "It's intense, but it's what you've got to do to get ahead," he shrugged.

HHH

Wine classes aren't just for the career-minded. Vancouver has lots of different programs that offer basic, accessible training in wine appreciation, including those at Liberty Wine School, Northwest Culinary Academy, and School of Mix. See LocalWineEvents.com for updated schedules.

Whether you're doing it for professional reasons or for personal enjoyment, learning about wine is a fun and enriching way to spend one night a week. Especially when you're eventually able to discern a Chianti from a Valpolicella.



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