

## On sommelier certification

For anyone who (sensibly) doesn't follow my social media spew, I've just passed the Certified Sommelier examinations given by the European chapter of the Court of Master Sommeliers (CMS). So, what the hell does that mean? In brief, I have attained a certain level of wine knowledge above and beyond that what say, 99% of people who enjoy wine have. In theory, I should be able to serve and discuss wine with a solid level of ability. I plan to go on more about this in detail on the wine blog (starting with the differences in wine certifications, followed by taking the CMS 1 and CMS 2) but this is more for anyone who has only a passing interest in the subject.

So most importantly, does this mean I have free reign to be snooty and talk down to people about wine as I supposedly know more than they do? Absolutely not and many people who achieve this miss this point. It means if anything, you should now have enough confidence in your wine knowledge that you don't need to be a blustery asshole when talking about wine. There are already plenty of these in the wine world and with the exception of the very, very rare few, if you are one of these, then your level of wine knowledge is actually quite horrible. The snooty put-downs are an attempt to silence everyone else in the room lest they might discover you're a fraud.

We don't need any more of these in the world and one of the aspects of the CMS that I really appreciate is that the classes are mandatory and if you do try to show off or be otherwise unpleasant, the Master Sommeliers will put you in your place readily. Obviously, they can't cure the world of attitude in wine, but when you start on these studies you meet more Master Sommeliers and again, with the exception of the very rare few, they are incredibly congenial people who aren't the least bit arrogant despite the fact they know more about wine than you do. This is the mark of a Master, not just their ability to hold all this knowledge in their heads or blind taste wines.

Does this mean that I'm a "Master Sommelier"? Not by a long shot. They have four levels with the CMS: 1 – Introductory, 2 – Certified, 3 – Advanced, and 4 – Master. So, I have level 2/4. Starting with Level 2 and up there are three parts in Theory, Tasting, and Service. That may not sound very impressive but level 1 is the kind of exam where if you're a really serious wine drinker who reads a good deal about wine, then maybe you'd pass. If you have some time working in the restaurant industry serving wine, then you could probably pass as well. This has a 90% pass rate. Level 2 is a much more difficult beast that requires a good deal of study of at least six months and has a 60% pass rate. Level 3 requires even more study of maybe 1-2 years and has a pass rate of 30%. Level 4 is just nuts. The amount of study needed for it is never enough. If memory serves, it has a pass rate of 5% for those who take it (remember you need to have Level 3 beforehand) and you have to be invited by the Court to take it. Given that, there are just over 200 people in the entire world who have passed this exam in its 45+ years of existence.

Why on earth did I do this? There were moments during studying when I asked myself that question, especially when trying to remember the 13 main wine regions of Germany. But ultimately it was for three reasons. The first was to fill out my knowledge. It's especially easy this day and age to get started nibbling on some little corner of the wine world, learn it well, and then think you can talk about wine in general. You can't and I started seeing this in other people writing about wine and knew it must be cropping up in what I write. So, I wanted a kick in the ass to have a broader understanding of wine.

The other reason I did this was for the wine tours. There are too many people who do tours in general who are little more than a driver that gives some memorized spiel. I had no interest in that which is why

I didn't start doing tours until just recently. Once people started asking for them because they'd bought one of the wine books, I wanted to give people an experience that was far and beyond the rather flabby ones that they get with other people who have fallen in to the "Those who can, do. Those who can't, lead tours." segment of the population. My ears want to vomit when I walk through Barcelona and hear the guided tours there.

The last reason was for perception. For the longest time I was adamant that I didn't need this and being a "sommelier" was bullshit. Editor in Chief would often argue against this but I saw it as the European desire to get more certificates. In America we just "do" things and that's enough. For wine, it's not and as I mentioned earlier, while my writing has gotten better, my knowledge was less than I'd hope. I needed to learn more and I wanted an easier way than rattling off the Bordeaux Third Growths to state that. The Editor was very much right and I'm damned happy to have this now. Even when I had "just" the Level 1 it helped and now the Level 2 helps even more.

Will I go on with this program, eventually to pursue the Master? Well, first I'd need to Level 3 Advanced and quite honestly, I'm a terrible test taker. I was part of the 40% who don't pass the Level 2 on their first try and so I had to take it again. I don't feel any shame in this and it actually made me a good deal stronger in my knowledge because I didn't want to fail a second time. Knowing this and the fact that it gets radically more difficult with each level, I would have to take it very slowly and see if there is time to fit this in to my life. That's a real problem in that once you're done with college learning to study again isn't easy and I wasn't all that good at it to start with, just brilliant. Ah crap, there's that arrogance thing coming in. Maybe I should continue to have such nonsense berated out of me.