

## The Court of Master Sommeliers at 40: Getting beyond rosé when in doubt

Master Sommeliers seem so much part of the contemporary restaurant and wine scene that it is hard to imagine the courage, determination, and vision required to create and nurture the organization. As it celebrates its 40th anniversary, James Tidwell MS pays tribute to its founders and follows the sometimes uphill and winding path to influence and success



**T**he inaugural meeting of the Court of Master Sommeliers occurred on April 23 and 24, 1977, at The Victoria Hotel in Torquay, a resort town on England's southwest coast. The gathering was historic in that it created an organization to train and certify sommeliers to the highest standards of beverage knowledge and service and signified the development of sommelier as respected profession.

### The Master Sommelier exam

Sommeliers, or “wine butlers” in 1960s parlance, tended to be section waiters tasked with serving a station while managing fellow waiters and serving beverages. Service, sometimes sales, but almost never purchasing were job functions. Barrie Larvin, former

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Brian Julyan (2nd from right) with MS colleagues at the 40th anniversary party in May, at 67 Pall Mall, London.

sommelier at Grosvenor House and The Dorchester in London, recalls executives at the hotels purchasing the wines. Keith Dougherty and Gino Nardella were considered unusual among sommeliers because they controlled the listings and had the ability to purchase wines at The Stafford Hotel. Training was scant. Larvin claims to have learned as much about wine from his well-traveled, sophisticated clientele as

from any other source. Eddie Osterland, who passed the Master Sommelier examination in 1973, was working as a waiter at the Ilikai Hotel in Honolulu in the early 1970s when one day the *maitre d'* advanced on him carrying a tastevin and hung it around his neck, saying, "Our Sommelier just called in sick, so we need you to do the job. White wine goes with fish. Red wine goes with meat. When in doubt, serve rosé."

At the same time, wine merchants and shippers needed highly trained, knowledgeable representatives to help sell products. Associations existed in various related industries, but none included a service component for certification. To fill the sales need and to encourage sommeliers toward education and training, the Vintners' Company, the Institute of Masters of Wine, the Hotel & Restaurant Association of Great Britain, the Wine & Spirit Association of Great Britain, and the Wholesale Tobacco Trade Association created and administered the first Master Sommelier examination in 1969 at Vintners' Hall in London, the examiners being drawn from the sponsoring organizations and distinguished members of the trade. The examination set the standards still upheld today and included the same three components: theory, practical service, and a blind tasting of six wines. Cyril Ware, George Clarke, and Danny Lydon passed to become the first Master Sommeliers.

### Origins of the Court

Brian Julyan had been sommelier at Trocadero Restaurant in London before moving to Torquay, where he blended beverage service and hotel management at such hotels as the five-star Imperial Hotel. Julyan's experience is representative of sommeliers pursuing the qualification in that era. He sat the Master Sommelier examination in 1971, passing the theory and practical elements at his first attempt. To prepare for the blind tasting, he attended a three-day course offered by Joe Naughalty MW. Attending classes given by Masters of Wine or courses held by the Wine & Spirit Education Trust was common among early Master Sommeliers, since no official pathway had been developed for the Master Sommelier certification. As John

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Brownsdon MW notes, however, "[O]ur [Master of Wine] discipline is to dissect mainly young wines from a commercial point of view, whereas the MS looks at their qualities more when they are ready to drink and with their possibilities of food matching." Julyan followed another practice still common among candidates today: finding a study partner. For a year, Julyan and fellow candidate Morris Smith held regular blind-tasting sessions, resulting in their both passing the examination in 1972.

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Barrie Larvin—the only positive respondent to Julyan's earlier inquiry—traveled to Torquay for a meeting with Julyan and Smith. According to Larvin, "Brian and Morris were a great team in forming the organization. Morris was a big proponent of education." Keith Dougherty, who became a Master Sommelier in 1974, reminisces that Julyan was "the chap for examinations and education, due to his work as lecturer and examiner at South Devon Technical College." Together, Julyan, Smith, and Larvin formed a potent driving force for the nascent idea.

### Formation and early years

The trip resulted in the inaugural meeting of the Court of Master Sommeliers, where Cyril Ware was elected chair, Keith Dougherty vice chair, and Brian Julyan secretary. At a time when Master Sommeliers were working to establish the Court and the legitimacy of the sommelier profession, the organization relied upon the good will of the industry. Percival "Val" Brown, a highly respected member of the wine industry and the driving force behind several industry organizations, is often mentioned for his assistance with resources. Among others, Keith Dougherty and Gino Nardella offered space at The Stafford Hotel, Gerard Basset OBE MS MW provided opportunities at Hotel du Vin, and Otto Hinderer—who passed the examination in 1985—arranged meeting space and discounted room rates at the Wentridge House Hotel. Brian Dawes, who achieved the qualification in 1985, contributed his knowledge of examinations gained from an academic career. Julyan assumed the role of chief examiner and, later, CEO. These and other Master Sommeliers donated time and effort to establishing the organization and qualification.

But at this critical stage, the examination almost undermined itself. By 1979, the examination's reputation was cemented with pass rates so low that the examination was more discouraging than encouraging. In response, the sponsoring organizations asked the Court to run a training course. This prompted the creation of the Advanced Course, offering formal training and a path to certification specifically for sommeliers. The Court was asked to assume administration of the Master Sommelier examination in 1982, though for the first few years continuity of standards was guaranteed by including experienced examiners from other organizations.

### International expansion

Also in the early 1980s, Fred Dame—who started in the industry as a dishwasher in a casino and had risen to become sommelier at The Sardine Factory in Monterey, California—saw an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about a sommelier examination in England. He sent two letters of inquiry before being invited to sit the examination at





Torquay in 1984. Dame did not realize that one was supposed to describe the wines during the blind-tasting component. He identified each wine with no explanation. A Master of Wine on the panel asked Dame to describe how he arrived at his conclusions. This resulted in Dame being awarded the inaugural Krug Cup, given to the candidate with the highest score when passing all three parts of the examination on the first attempt. The other successful candidate that year was Claudia Harris, the first woman to achieve the qualification.

Like the UK, the US was developing a restaurant culture. Dame identified an opportunity to follow the path that Julian and Larvin had paved in the UK by bringing the Court of Master Sommeliers to the US. Giving the examination an international dimension was a momentous step. The expansion put the examination on a far wider stage and brought the pursuit of the highest standards of restaurant beverage service to new countries. The feat was not without its challenges, however. All of the examination materials had to be transported from England, experienced

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examiners were needed, and the financial strain was daunting. The pressure was immense. In 1986, Larvin and Julian made an exploratory trip to Monterey, where they met Dame's

Above (from left): Xavier Rousset, Gerard Basset, Larry Stone, and Dimitri Mesnard at the anniversary dinner.

employers, Ted Balestreri and Burt Cutino. Balestreri's other role was as president of the National Restaurant Association, and he recognized the opportunity to improve beverage service. The National Restaurant Association agreed to underwrite the Court of Master Sommeliers in the US for the short term. The next year, a group including Julian, Larvin, Smith, Val Brown, and several Masters of Wine returned to conduct the first international Advanced Course and Master Sommelier Examination. Larvin, then chair of the Court of Master Sommeliers, and Julian, secretary, remember the sense of both anxiety and achievement that accompanied the expansion.

**Growth of the Americas Chapter**  
Due to logistical and financial challenges, the early format in the United States offered the Advanced Course followed the next day by the Master Sommelier examination, making an already grueling examination even more so. Of the 18 candidates who sat the Advanced Course in 1987, the group that passed included four future Master Sommeliers: Madeline Triffon, Nunzio Alioto, Evan



Goldstein, and Fran Kysela. Triffon, however, was the only person to pass the Master Sommelier examination the next day. She was first American female Master Sommelier and the first female Krug Cup recipient.

Upon Alioto's passing of the exam in England later in 1987, Dame and Alioto played much the same role that Julyan and Larvin had in the UK, driving the growth of the organization by helping to spread awareness of the sommelier profession and service standards throughout the country. By 1989, there were enough Master Sommeliers in the US to form the Americas Chapter. Analogous to the establishment of the Court in the UK, the Americas Chapter experienced lean times, with many Master Sommeliers contributing pro bono work and offering resources to help keep the chapter viable. The Introductory Sommelier Course was developed in the late 1980s to groom aspirants. As more sommeliers passed the examination in the States and the organization gained traction across the country, the Americas Chapter assumed responsibility for the administration of courses and examinations in the region.

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**A global standard**

The 1990s and 2000s were a period of steady growth for both the profession and the Court of Master Sommeliers. In 1990, an Introductory Course and Advanced Examination were offered in Australia, followed by training and exams in Germany, then New Zealand.

The growth produced both cultural and structural challenges. Europe's diverse languages, nationalities, and wine-service history involved cultural considerations that were less relevant for

Above: One of the coveted MS certificates, currently held by 236 successful candidates worldwide.

the more homogenous development in the US, whereas the financial impact of diverse wine markets in the US presented structural challenges that the well-developed European markets did not face. Though the logistical aspects of examinations shifted in different parts of the world, the chapters continued to work in concert to provide the same standards of knowledge and service.

In recent years, expansion has continued as interest in the profession has spread to new countries. Australia, Canada, Mexico, and New Zealand have all developed robust sommelier communities with validation provided by the Court of Master Sommeliers certifications. South America and Asia are both developing rapidly. The diversity of nationalities is increasing, and the gender balance is improving, too. A new generation of Master Sommeliers is assuming leadership and guidance of the organization. As these changes take place, the Court remains relevant by continuing to fulfill its vision of setting the global standard of excellence for beverage service within the hospitality industry, doing so with integrity, exemplary knowledge, and humility.