

# TexasMonthly

## Stepping Into the Shoes of a Sommelier

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FRI FEBRUARY 8, 2013 4:05 PM

Sometimes a meal at a fancy restaurant can be a little intimidating. And when the restaurant's sommelier strides up to in a nice polished suit, with the specific intent to help pick the perfect wine for the evening, it can compound that anxiety. But the job of the sommelier is to guide a diner to the wine that is suited to his palate preferences and his pocketbook.

Sommeliers are thoroughly trained to be of service. Be sure to check for a little oval pin in green, purple, or maroon with gold lettering on it--this signifies a particular level of certification from the [Court of Master Sommeliers](#), an international organization that serves as the examining body for sommeliers.

People certified by the CMS have spent many hours pouring through the world of wine and training their palates. They become familiar with a standard set of white and red grapes from around the world and use a streamlined sense of deductive reasoning based on sight, aroma, taste, and texture to blindly identify wines. Most important to the diner, they've been tested on their level of customer service. Are they friendly? Do they have depth of knowledge AND can they make suggestions it in a way that makes the guest feel valued and important, rather than patronized or uninformed? (No one wants to think they're engaging with the snooty maître d' from *Ferris Buehler*.)

The Court requires a sommelier to pass [four levels](#): Level 1 Introduction, Certified Sommelier, Advanced Sommelier, and Master Sommelier. Advancing levels is no easy task (to put it in perspective, there are about 160 Certified Sommeliers, 16

Advanced Sommeliers, and only 7 Master Sommeliers in the state of Texas). The pass rate for the Certified Exam is about 63 percent. Only thirty percent pass the Advanced level, and a miniscule three percent successfully become Master Sommeliers.

Taking the courses is, in part, for love of the game as it's a significant expense to enroll. The Level 1 course and the Level 2 exam cost around \$350 each. The difficult multi-day tests for the Advanced and Master Sommelier levels can creep up to a few thousand dollars, especially if one is required to take an exam out of state, which carries airfare and hotel expenses. All this plus the investment it takes to buy wines to better inform the palate about the different testable grape varieties from around the world. (Word to the curious: shopping the discount bin at your local liquor store won't cut it. You may be able to find some good, standard Malbecs from Argentina for \$15, but when you start to train your senses on the Burgundy region of France, expect to part with quite a few more dollars. Another bit of advice: start a study group to help share the burden.)

The challenge has intrigued me for some time, so two years ago, I took the first challenge in popping the proverbial cork on my wine education by taking the Intro Course and Level 1 exam at the 2011 Texas Sommelier Conference.

After working up enough confidence, I decided to go for the more intensive second level, which awards the official "Certified Sommelier" moniker. As part of that training, the past year I've worked with a study group of three friends to learn as much information about wine before taking a grueling three-part test.

First you must pass a forty-question written exam that requires detailed knowledge of wine regions, wine laws, viticultural methods, grape varieties by region, and as you might expect, a whole lot of geography. For example, I now know about the slate soils that cover the southern-facing hillsides along the Mosel River in Germany and how that played a part in Riesling from the that area being called the "angel tears" of all wine.

Then you have fifteen minutes to examine and taste one red wine and one white wine to determine the grape varietal, structure (acid, tannin, alcohol, etc.), climate, origin, and possible vintage of each. Yeah, it's as complicated as it sounds.

Following that you have to be prepared for a fifteen-minute service exam, in which you are required to serve and be examined by a Master Sommelier in a professional restaurant setting. Basically that means you have to look professional, know how to open a bottle of still wine, and how to uncork a bottle of sparkling wine without a sound (no drama of letting the cork blast across the room).

For weeks and weeks I've been consumed with wine study, both on my own, and with my trusty study group. I've sipped, tasted, smelled and spit countless wines. (Sorry, Emily Post.) I've practiced carrying trays of champagne flutes around my own dining room table—clockwise only. My study group has also leaned heavily on the generous help of Austin-based sommeliers to train us to taste, test, and serve.

I was ready. Earlier this month I showed up in a full suit and heels to the Driskill Hotel at 8 a.m. having dined on a bland breakfast of dry toast and unsalted eggs and only brushed my teeth with water—can't do anything to mess up your palate before blind tasting. After a few minutes of crunching through last-minute notecards, a few trips to the bathroom to say a few prayers, I completed all three parts of the exam by noon. I can't reveal any of the particular questions, but I can tell you that if you don't know the 32 grand cru of the Cote D'Or in Burgundy, what "Anbaugebeite" means in Germany, or the more than a dozen synonyms for Tempranillo, you're going to have a hard time with this exam.

Finally, after what seemed an interminable amount of time, the Master Sommeliers in charge of proctoring the exam hosted a Champagne toast to reveal the results. And...

I passed!

It was with a surprising amount of emotion that I accepted my pin and certificate, because not only did I manage to make the grade, but the other three members of my study group did as well. And we weren't alone. Of the 33 candidates who each made a valiant effort at passing this exam, 25 came away with the distinction of being a Certified Sommelier.

I can't say that I know exactly what I'll do with it now that I have it, but I can say without question, that I have a sincere appreciation for the people who make the investment to take this course of education for a career in wine.

So next time you're sitting in their restaurant, wondering if you should go with the Napa Cab or the Italian Chianti, take advantage of the walking, talking wine encyclopedia. You've both paid for the experience.