

CAREER

FOCUS

HOW LEADERS PROFIT FROM CHANGE

What every leader
should know about
leading in times
of change

NAVIGATING CORPORATE AMERICA

Insight for
beginners
and CEOs

THE POWER TO LEAD

The 2004
CareerFOCUS
Eagle Award
Winners

November/December 2004

www.NELL.net

www.careerfocusmagazine.com

\$3.00

What They Forgot to Ask You in Business School

Tasting Success

BY CAROL PATTON

There's a growing profession that many people have never heard of and frequently have trouble pronouncing. It requires long hours and big sacrifices, and offers minimal training opportunities. But for those it attracts, there's nothing else like it.

The profession is that of sommelier, or wine expert. Even as little as 15 years ago, people envisioned sommeliers as Caucasian men who were a bit stuffy and overweight. That stereotype is changing. As more people transform into weekend chefs, and as the country's demographics shift—the number of Hispanics is increasing almost four times faster than the rest of the population—the field has opened up to women and people of color who are passionate about wine.

"In the last 20 years, we've worked very hard to make this profession very user-friendly and accessible to the public," says Joseph Miller, president of the International Sommelier Guild in Miami, which offers training and certification programs. "Fifteen years ago, 95 percent of our students were Caucasian male. Now we're averaging 50/50 in the sexes." He adds about 25 percent of applicants are people of color.

There are basically three organizations in the country that offer some type of training or certification program for sommeliers. At the guild, students can enroll in four different programs: a wine introductory course; another that addresses different wine regions and tastings; an advanced class that offers a sommelier designation, and a fourth program providing a grand sommelier degree, which focuses on wine specializations and management.



The Court of Master Sommeliers in Napa, Calif., also offers introductory and advanced courses, as well as a master sommelier diploma exam. The American Sommelier Association, based in New York, provides an eight week foundation class that covers tastings, major wine styles and regions, and another 18-week course on viticulture (grape growing), vinification (the wine making process) and wine regions on an advanced level.

Despite these programs, most sommeliers are self-taught, train on the job, and are voracious readers of wine-related books and articles. "Constantly gaining knowledge about wine is a necessity," says Miller, explaining that people who enter the field must be just as passionate about learning as they are about wine.

Skills and Opportunities

The profession almost requires a sixth sense or an uncanny ability to read customers on the spot and be sensitive to both their palate and budget.

Other responsibilities include: managing a wine cellar, matching or pairing wine with food, researching wine, selling wine to customers, exploring different wine regions throughout the world, developing a sophisticated palate that can distinguish between thousands of wines, and building a strong memory that can instantly recall those differences, no matter how subtle.

"The only way to develop a sophisticated palate is with practice," says Joe La Villa, chef, sommelier, and assistant academic director of culinary arts at The Art Institute of Phoenix. "Drinking and tasting wine are two different things. You have to practice taking detailed notes to help you remember which wine stood out among the 80 wines you tasted."

La Villa says the Institute recently began teaching its culinary arts students about wine, ranging from how to serve it and gauging appropriate temperatures, to maintaining a wine cellar and dealing with faulty wines.

The annual salary of sommeliers varies depending upon their employer, length of experience, and amount of responsibility. According to La Villa, those with limited experience—under several years—can typically earn around \$40,000 a year at a restaurant. Some headwaiters also receive a stipend for managing the wine cellar. However, experienced sommeliers working at major resorts often command six figures.

Sommeliers now have more opportunities to practice their profession than ever before. Some are employed in retail—exporting or importing—earning around \$30,000 a year, while others work at wineries, breweries, or distributors for slightly higher salaries.

The consulting market has also expanded for talented sommeliers. Some develop wine programs for hotels and restaurant chains or conduct wine tastings for private parties. Others teach wine courses aimed at the general public or write wine-related books and articles.

"If you're not someone who grew up drinking wine, and have no prior experience, but may be interested in getting into the field, a college degree can get you in the door of a distributor," says Robert Anton Fino-Fraser, a sommelier at Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steak House in Fort Worth, Texas.

Fino-Fraser, who's been a sommelier for five years, says wine distributors extensively train their staff in wine tasting and knowledge. So do many restaurants and hotels that support an extensive wine program.

Either way, he says be prepared to learn daily and work hard.

"If you have a passion for wine and can get along with people, this is a very rewarding industry," says Fino-Fraser. "You're doing something that gives you joy and you're getting paid for it. You can go as far as you want."

How I Started Alicia Towns Franken Boston

Nearly 10 years ago, while waitressing at Grill 23 Bar & Restaurant in Boston, Alicia Towns Franken drank a glass of Australian wine that she swears gave her goose bumps.

At that moment, she wanted to touch wine bottles, read their labels, and sit in on tastings. Her boss indulged her newfound interest by allowing her to participate in the restaurant's wine program. Two years later, she was offered the position of wine director and sommelier.

She held that job for eight years and was involved in every aspect of the profession. By day, she handled everything from inventorying and tasting wine, to visiting vineyards throughout Europe and South Africa. At night, she served as both educator and entertainer by helping customers select an appropriate wine with their meal.

"My biggest job was to match palates with pocketbooks," says 38 year-old Towns Franken. "You need to read people and never make them feel the pain of buying a bottle of wine that costs more than they want to spend."

As her knowledge of wine expanded, so did her family. She quit her job in 2002 to care for her new baby. By then, the restaurant's initial two-page wine list, featuring 160 selections, had grown to 53 pages offering 900 different wines. Towns Franken and two sommelier assistants were also selling an average of 120 bottles each night—\$3.5 million a year.

She plans to launch a wine company with another expert. Although she admits the profession is demanding, she says, "It's better than any nine-to-five job."



How I Started William Lewis Santa Ana, California

Every month, William Lewis receives several thank-you letters from customers for helping them select a wine with their meal. For the past nine years, Lewis has been the assistant manager and sommelier at Morton's Steak House in Santa Ana, Calif.

His entrée into the profession came naturally. About 10 years ago, he worked as a wine bartender on weekends, describing a variety of wines to customers. He became quite good at it and realized he also enjoyed it. He attended a three-day wine seminar in 1995 run by a master sommelier. After passing the test, he became certified.

"The hardest part to learn is how to budget your time and set aside time to study and learn about wine," says Lewis, age 38, who works nearly 70 hours a week and sells up to 100 bottles of wine per night. Lewis says he wouldn't trade places with anyone. Every night, he uses a combination of listening, culinary, sales, and customer service skills to match wine with people and food. One of his favorite parts of the job is introducing customers to a vintage that they enjoy.

If time permits, he hopes to become a master sommelier. "You have to constantly be updated on the world of wine," he says, adding that the profession draws out the passion in people."

How I Started Maxence Ariza Denver

Although his family's roots are part Latino, Maxence Ariza, 43, grew up in France where he learned to appreciate good food and wine at an early age.

"I was lucky enough to be raised in Europe where wine is a big part of the culture," says Ariza, an associate

instructor in the College of Culinary Arts at Johnson & Wales University in Denver.

After earning a degree from the Culinary College of Avignon in 1980, he worked for two decades in a variety of restaurants as manager and wine buyer. In 2000, he joined the faculty of Johnson & Wales, teaching beverage and dining room principals. Two years later, he achieved the status of advanced certified sommelier from the Court of Master Sommeliers, an organization that promotes improved standards of beverage knowledge and service in hotels and restaurants.

His workload includes teaching two classes where students learn about wine service, appreciation, food pairing, and different wine regions throughout the world.

Within the next several years, he hopes to become a master sommelier, the highest level sommeliers can obtain. He believes this certification will help him grow within the university and promote his consulting business that offers a variety of services, such as wine list development and wine tasting & pairing dinners.

For those who want to enter the field, Ariza says a culinary background can definitely help, but your overall driving force must be the love of wine.

How I Started Manuel G. Nieves Cleveland

For most of his life, Manuel G. Nieves, 32, planned on becoming a lawyer. Even when attending college, he enrolled in courses like political science and international relations.

To help support himself through school, he began working as a bartender at Bennigan's restaurant at 18, and was signing liquor orders before he was old enough to drink. Back then, he had no idea this job would lead him away from a legal career toward a profession that initially held little appeal.

"I go to sleep and wake up thinking about wine," says Nieves, who was recently promoted to sommelier for InterContinental Hotels, which supports 142 properties worldwide. "You have to love food and wine or you won't be able to deal with the time you have to put into it."

During his average 70-hour work week, he updates wine lists, orders and tastes wine, meets wine distributors, helps hotel guests pair wine with food, and trains hotel staff—room service, the concierge, and front desk—in the art of wine.

Like most sommeliers, he's self-taught and has traveled to wineries in South Africa and Europe to expand his knowledge. While his job demands many skills ranging from organizational to training, Nieves' favorite part of the job has always been guest relations. "Guest relations and sales are what we do," he says. "You need a fantastic palate, and must be willing to spend time developing it. The sacrifices are worth it if you stick with it."

How I Started Brian Duncan Chicago

Brian Duncan doesn't like to refer to himself as a sommelier but he has all the passion, dedication, and knowledge the profession demands.

As a partner and wine director at BIN 36 restaurant in Chicago, he says he's had an affinity toward food and wine for as long as he can remember.

"I was raised by people who respected the dining process," says Duncan, age 46. "My parents cooked very well so I developed an appreciation for food and wine at a young age."

He began working at restaurants when he was 15 years old. By his early 20s, customers were requesting him to help them match wine with their meal. The more he learned about wine, the more intrigued he became. It soon developed into a private hobby.

Since then, Duncan has educated himself about wine on a daily basis. His restaurant menu contains written descriptions of different wines and offers suggestions for each entrée. He conducts mandatory training programs for staff each afternoon—briefing the kitchen staff and servers about the evening's specials and appropriately matched wines.

Duncan says the profession is wide open for anyone who wants to learn and work hard, but there's little room for big egos. "A lot of sommeliers think it's about how much they know and who they can impress with their knowledge," says Duncan. "The profession is about educating and entertaining, not intimidating."

How I Started Andre Mack New York

In his mid 20s, Andre Mack was a stockbroker at CitiBank in New York. But after two years in what he describes as an unfulfilling job, he moved out of the financial industry. Mack returned to what he enjoyed best—

working at restaurants, which he had done since he was a teenager. He quickly landed a job as a waiter at a steak house back home in San Antonio, Texas. "I realized that I could boost my check average if I sold wine," he says. "So I started learning about wine by reading and tasting."

Within the year, he developed enough knowledge to pass the first level exam from the Court of Master Sommeliers. Ready for a bigger challenge, he accepted a sommelier position at another local restaurant where he developed and managed its wine program from scratch. After one year, Mack was hired as sommelier by the French Laundry restaurant in Napa Valley, Calif. Six months later, he was asked to serve in the same capacity at its new restaurant, Per Se, which opened last February in New York.

Now 31, Mack's days are filled with ordering, inventorying, selling and tasting wine. He teaches servers about wine, reviews sales techniques, and identifies wines they can recommend to customers.

Mack believes the profession offers instant gratification. "I can sell wine to a guest and see his disappointment or excitement on his face right away," he says. "In some ways, it's an adrenaline rush." ■

