



Photo by
Jenny Linquist

Masters

OF THE

WINE WORLD

BY SHERRIE NEGREA



Sabato Sagaria '97 stood nervously in a conference room at a hotel in Aspen with six glasses of wine—three whites and three reds—placed on a table in front of three judges. His task, over the next 25 minutes, was to identify not only the grape variety, but also the vintage, country of origin, and quality of each wine. If he failed this test, Sagaria would have to start from scratch in his decade-long quest to pass the three-part master sommelier exam.

But that spring day in 2012, Sagaria was “hoping that the wines were speaking to me and I had a clear head and could be very deductive in my thinking and not be intimidated by the other folks sitting there.” The years of studying wines—from the day he entered SHA’s Introduction to Wines course and became fascinated by enology to the day he became food and beverage director at the Little Nell, the hotel where he was now taking the test—paid off, and Sagaria was able to name the six wines: an Alsatian Riesling, a Spanish Albariño, an Austrian Grüner Veltliner, an Australian Grenache, an Italian Amarone, and a Bordeaux blend.

Having conquered the blind tasting, Sagaria became one of 146 people in the United States and just 230 in the world to earn membership in the Court of Master Sommeliers, the certifying body. “I was on cloud nine,” he said. “I was in a whole other world—to be able to achieve something that I had been working towards for the past ten years.”

STUDY AND SACRIFICE

Four SHA alumni have achieved the esteemed title of master sommelier, and all say that passing the master’s level exam was one of the most grueling challenges they have ever faced. They also agree that the personal satisfaction of reaching that milestone was worth the years of sacrifice.

Before being invited to take the master’s exam, candidates must pass three levels of qualifying exams: introductory, certified, and advanced. The master sommelier exam itself consists of three exams: theory, an oral test of a candidate’s knowledge about the world’s wine-growing regions and styles of wine; service, which requires a demonstration of wine service knowledge, technique, and etiquette; and blind tasting, in which a candidate is asked to accurately describe and identify six wines.

The rules were modified in 2013 to require candidates to pass the theory exam before taking the practical

Christopher Bates '02 at his winery in Arkport, New York. Photo by Jon Reis



Greg Harrington '92 shares the fruits of his winery, Gramercy Cellars, with friends in Walla Walla, Washington. Photo by Jenny Linquist

exams in service and tasting, which they then have three chances to pass within three years. Prior to 2013, first-time candidates took all three parts at once and had three years to get through all of them before being required to reset, or start over.

“It’s a pretty stressful environment,” said Christopher Bates ’02, who had to reset after failing the blind tasting three times. “You’ve not only spent a lot of time on it but have also invested a lot of money and emotion into it. You have a lot riding on the exam.”

DRIVING ALL NIGHT

In Arkport, New York—a village of 832 people due west of the Finger Lakes towns of Watkins Glen and Hammondsport—Bates grew up cooking in his mother’s kitchen and washing dishes at a restaurant called Rupert’s at the Lodge. After graduating from SHA, he worked for a while in restaurants in the Midwest. Deciding that he wanted to learn more about winemaking, he moved to Europe to harvest grapes in Italy and Germany. He then spent a decade running luxury properties in Texas and Pennsylvania.

Bates took the introductory sommelier exam while still a student, in 2001, but then set the books aside until 2007, when he began working on establishing Element Winery in Arkport with the help of his father. In September 2012, on his way to conquering the master’s exam in May 2013, he won the gold medal at the Concours des Jeunes Sommeliers in Capetown, South Africa, an extremely select competition sponsored by the International Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs. During those very busy years he was still working more than 200 miles away, as general manager and executive chef at the Hotel Fauchère in Milford, Pennsylvania. He moved back to New York only in 2013. “It was a personal challenge,” said Bates, who now teaches wine courses around the country. “I enjoyed the drive of it.”

Bates is still driving. In addition to making wine, he can be found many nights manning the grill at F.L.X. Winery, the restaurant he opened in 2014 with his wife, Isabel. The very informal eatery, up a country road west of Seneca Lake and a favorite with the area’s residents and winery personnel, serves artisanal hot dogs, housemade sausages, and hamburgers and offers an apparently random (but don’t bet on

it) assortment of wines from around the world. Bates has also been busy launching an entirely different restaurant concept, F.L.X. Table, which opened in February at the north end of the lake in Geneva. F.L.X. Table has only one table, for twelve, where friends and strangers can enjoy a sophisticated fixed-course meal together like guests at a dinner party, choosing their wines from the bottles arrayed on a sideboard. The restaurant is connected to F.L.X. Culture House, where Bates will focus on producing very small quantities of barrel-aged sour beers.



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Bates is the only master sommelier in the world who works professionally as an executive chef running a kitchen. Involved in managing all aspects of his restaurants, he noted that what he learned about hospitality while preparing for the master sommelier exam is part of everything he does. “A sommelier—a lot of that is based around service, and service is at the core of every level of hospitality,” he said. “That’s something we work very heavily on.”

DRINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Greg Harrington '92 grew up on Long Island in a family that sometimes drank “wine from a box.” He didn’t learn to appreciate wines until he took the Introduction to Wines course taught by Stephen Mutkoski '67, PhD '76, the Banfi Vintners Professor of Wine Education and Management, in his senior year. “I just had no idea what wine could taste like,” said Harrington, who now owns Gramercy Cellars, in Walla Walla, Washington, with his wife, Pam. “I didn’t really have any intention of doing anything with wine.”

A year after Harrington graduated, his father asked him to set up the wine department in a restaurant he was opening in Las Vegas. While there, Harrington met a wine salesman and a wine director who asked him to study with them for the master sommelier exam. “I thought, ‘Wow, this is one of the hardest exams in the world, and I love wine,’” Harrington recalled. “Why don’t I try and take it and see if I could pass?”

Just three years later, Harrington had qualified to take the master’s exam. He nailed the blind tasting—for many people, the most intimidating part of the test—but he failed the theory and service tests.

He flew to London later that year to retake them at the Dorchester. As he poured a red wine for the judges there, he spilled some of it on the table. As his faux pas spread into the tablecloth, he summoned his composure and called upon his three years of experience as a sommelier to help him salvage the situation.

“I just apologized,” said Harrington, who was then only 26. “There’s a formal way to cover up a stain on a table”—with clean table napkins—“and I also offered to bring the gentleman another glass of wine.” The judges were mollified and he passed, becoming the youngest master sommelier ever in the United States.

Looking back, he said, “It’s one of the greatest days of your life—getting married, having kids, and passing the master sommelier exam.”

NOW TRY DOING IT ON CAMERA

Some years after his triumph in London, Harrington visited Steve Mutkoski's class as a guest lecturer. There he met Jack Mason, CIA '08, SHA '11, Mutkoski's head teaching assistant for Introduction to Wines.

Mason had begun his wine education at the Culinary Institute of America and was already focused on a career in wines when he met Harrington. While at SHA, he won a Banfi scholarship and spent the summer of his senior year immersed in wine and food culture and production in Tuscany, Piedmont, and Rome.

After graduation, Mason joined the team of sommeliers at Pappas Bros. Steakhouse in Houston, Texas, not far from his hometown of College Station. Harrington recommended that he pursue certification by the Court of Master Sommeliers. Six years later, Mason became one of the youngest master sommeliers in the guild's history.

After passing the introductory and certified exams in one year, and the advanced level the next, he picked off the parts of the master's exam one year at a time. The last to fall was the blind tasting, as Mason twice fell prey to an acute case of nerves. "It's a huge ball of anxiety, because people are going into the exam room and you have hopes for them," he said. "But almost everyone comes back with some amount of disappointment, and you're about to walk into that."

Mason's final attempt at the blind tasting was even more intense. As a subject of the Esquire Network's six-episode reality TV series, *Uncorked*, he had a camera crew documenting his preparation for the exam (though not, mercifully, the exam itself). The show chronicled six New York City sommeliers and the mentors, including Sagaria, who helped them as they prepared for the exam.

"I'm the only one to pass of the six people" on the show, Mason said proudly. Recalling the moment last May at the Little Nell when one of the examiners took him aside to tell him the results, he said, "It's real raw emotion. It's just one of those kind of black-out moments of existence."

Ten months before becoming a master sommelier, Mason joined Marta, Danny Meyer's upscale Manhattan pizzeria, as its first wine director and created the restaurant's wine program. And what does he recommend to drink with pizza? Champagne.

"Categorically, there is no other wine that pairs as well with so many different foods, especially pizza," he said. "A bottle of Champagne can carry you through most styles of pizza, and do so on a very high level, because of the refreshing acidity, cleansing bubbles, and moderate alcohol. Champagne also happens to be very delicious on its own."

And it's wonderful for celebrating life as a master sommelier.

Sabato Sagaria '97
at the Modern in New
York City. Photo by
Jesse Winter



Jack Mason '11 at Marta.
Photo by Alice Gao

THE BENEFITS OF MASTERY

"I wanted to become a master sommelier because every one of them I have met represents a kind of ideal of mastering something and being at the top of their game," Mason said. "Being a young person, people don't always take you super seriously. So one of the reasons I wanted to pursue this was to add that instant level of respect and recognition that I have achieved this level of knowledge." Mason hopes that the recognition and stature he has achieved will help him attract investors interested in supporting his goal of establishing his own restaurant back home in Texas.

For Sagaria, earning the master sommelier title helped him catapult into an executive position at Danny

Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group, which has created some of New York City's most famous restaurants, notably Union Square Café and Gramercy Tavern. The move came about after he ran into Meyer at the Pebble Beach Food and Wine Festival in 2013 and learned that he was creating a position at the company for a chief restaurant officer.

Six months later, Sagaria was offered the job. He now oversees Union Square's thirteen restaurants as well as the company's marketing, operations, and facilities. Although he isn't on the floor helping customers choose wines, he said he uses the skills he gained preparing for the master sommelier exam to improve the quality of the restaurants.

"I'm probably unique in the sense that I don't necessarily use it on a day-to-day basis," he said. "It's more working with our teams to shape our beverage programs and offer a different perspective. I look at it from the eyes of a guest and from the eyes of a business leader and from the eyes of a wine director and sommelier and how we can shape the vision for each wine program. We look at wine as a business within a business, and I'm helping them to start growing as business leaders and as sommeliers."

No matter where their careers take them, the four SHA alumni who earned the title will always be master sommeliers, proudly displaying the initials "MS" after their names and wearing the coveted red

oval lapel pin that depicts the god of wine. Since they are all teaching courses in the program, they are also helping to nurture the next generation of leaders in the wine world. "One of the big benefits to me from having achieved this accreditation," Sagaria said, "is to be able to pass that knowledge on to others and connect to them. That is really exciting." ▾



SHERRIE NEGREA is an Ithaca-based freelance writer specializing in higher education and healthcare.