Ben Hasko has just become only the 3rd Australian to complete from the Master Sommelier examination

Sydney based Ben, who runs Cru Wines (a specialist wine importer and distributor) and Bootleggers (an equally exclusive online wine retailer) joins Franck Moreau MS of Merivale and Sebastian Crowther MS of the Rockpool Group, who have also passed one of the hardest exams known to man to earn the right to put the letters MS after their names.

Becoming a Master Sommelier is no mean feat and many have argued that the process of testing and preparing for entry into the Court of Master Sommeliers is even harder than studying for a medical degree, taking years to prepare for. To even be eligible for the exam you must first graduate as an Introductory Sommelier, then a Certified Sommelier, and then an Advanced Sommelier, before applying to be considered. Entrance to the final exam is by invitation only. Since the Court's inception in 1969, only 236 (with Ben being officially no. 236) have graduated and each year the pass rate is normally less than 5%. In 2016, just 6 people gained one of the most exclusive professional credentials in the world: Master Sommelier.

Ben’s achievement is even more unique and impressive when you take into account that he passed on the first attempt; something that has only happened a handful of times. The average candidate sits for the exam around three times. As Ben explains, “It is a pretty intense experience. There are 3 components to the MS diploma. If you pass 1 or 2 components the first time you try then they say ‘the clock has started’. You then get 2 more attempts over the next 2 years to be successful in the remaining components. If you aren’t, then you have to start all 3 from scratch. I am very fortunate to have achieved all 3 components in one sitting and I’m very honoured to have been awarded the inaugural Dom Ruinart Trophy in recognition of this.”

The journey to become a Master Sommelier takes both talent and commitment. Ben says, “You need to commit both your time and considerable finances in pursuit of the diploma. I am fortunate that my job involves travel, and meeting some great sommeliers and winemakers around the globe. It also gives me a lot of exposure to high quality – and often high priced - wines, which helped reduce the financial side of things. But balancing work time, family time and study time was a real challenge. Particularly as our companies Cru Wines and Bootleggers only started two years ago.”

Ben first developed an interest for wine whilst he was studying engineering and his first dream was actually to achieve the Master of Wine. He wasn’t long into studying for the WSET Diploma before he decided he needed to turn this passion into a career and got a job within the wine industry, first with Rockpool in Sydney and then Vue de Monde in Melbourne. Ben comments, “I really enjoyed being a Sommelier. Not only discovering amazing wines for myself but learning how to read a customer's palate, understanding what they want and will love - even when they sometimes can’t communicate it themselves - and being a part of them discovering something new. This is what got me interested in starting to study for the Sommelier exams back in 2011 and it was a natural progression that I ended up studying for both the Master of Wine and Master Sommelier at the same time.”

“Both the Master of Wine and Master Sommelier exams are incredibly challenging but in different ways; one more academic and one more practical. However what impresses me most with both is how open everyone is to help. Whenever I have reached out to someone, they have always given so much time and knowledge to help me. It’s like there is an unwritten rule that once you have reached the highest level achievable, it is then your role to help others get there too. The generosity of the wine industry never ceases to amaze me and I look forward to upholding this tradition.”

What else is next for Ben Hasko? “I will continue my search for the world’s most interesting wines for Cru Wines and Bootleggers, and continue studying towards the Master of Wine exams in June.”

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