

Noses Seek Wine Geekdom's Biggest Prize

By SAM PERKINS

“O.K. people, we’ve got 48 minutes. Ready?” It’s Tuesday night, and as usual four candidates for the wine world’s toughest exam are gathered for a training session at the Upper West Side apartment of Jean Reilly, a wine writer.

As Ms. Reilly issued her warning, each student considered the six glasses of wine before them, with a printout of typical exam questions. The selections are sparkling whites — from Spain, France and California, as they will soon learn — and three fortified red wines, including a tawny port and port-style wines from South Africa and Australia.

Each candidate will write a detailed 300-word assessment of each wine. They will all hazard informed guesses about the country and region of origin, the grape variety and the winemaking methods. Finally, they’ll put their palates on the line with an assessment of the quality.

“On your marks, get set, go,” Ms. Reilly said. She and her fellow tasters — Philippe Newlin, a foreign-currency trader; Jennifer Simonetti, a brand manager for Kobrand, a wine importer; Christy Canterbury, a former banker and now wine industry consultant — are the core of a group of New Yorkers pursuing the Master of Wine certificate, the most coveted and difficult to attain credential in the world of wine.

As one master put it, “If you’re in the wine world, having an

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Nicolas Goldberg for The New York Times

STUDY HALL Jean Reilly and Philippe Newlin prepare for the Master of Wine exam at Ms. Reilly’s home in New York.

Wine Geekdom's Biggest Prize

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M.W. after your name says, 'Don't mess with me.'"

The aspirants hope to be among the bare dozen successful candidates out of about 80 worldwide who are to take the Master of Wine exam this June. (As a first-year candidate, the soonest Ms. Canterbury can take the exam is 2005.) Only 19 Americans — two of them women — have graduated as Masters of Wine since the exam was opened to non-British candidates in 1987. The Institute of Masters of Wine, in London, administers the program. There are only 244 Masters of Wine worldwide.

About 15 Americans are expected to take the exam this year. Roger Bohmrich, president of the North American branch of the Masters of Wine, is optimistic about their chances. "This year's group is one of the best prepared ever," he said.

The certificate was introduced in 1953 as a way to set apart experienced wine professionals. It was opened to people not directly involved in the wine trade in 1983 and later to those outside the United Kingdom.

To be admitted to the program, candidates are expected to have at least five

Strivers train to be certified experts.

years of in-depth professional experience buying, selling or writing about wine and, with a few exceptions, to have taken preparatory courses. They must submit a 1,000-word essay on wine theory and a detailed practical tasting analysis of three wines assigned by the institute.

Held every June in London, San Francisco and Sydney, Australia, the exam involves four days of wine tasting and essay writing about the minutiae of vine cultivation, vinification, the business of wine and "contemporary issues." Three half-days are spent in blind tastings in which candidates must identify 12 wines, analyze their fine points and flaws in tightly reasoned essays.

The institute makes it clear that, like craftsmen entering a guild, aspirants must demonstrate not just competence but mastery. Exams are graded A to F, but any mark below B minus is a failing grade.

"That's why it's called 'master' of wine," said the institute's president, Siobhan Turner, "because 'adequate' isn't good enough."

"Studying for the M.W. is a form of masochism," said Bob Paulinski, wine director at Sam's Club, Wal-Mart's warehouse-store chain, who became a M.W. in 2002. Like many before him, he failed portions of the exam on early attempts.

Not least of the difficulties is that although there is a suggested reading list, there is no set curriculum to follow.

"The course is largely self-directed and very demanding," said Mary Ewing-Mulligan, director of the International Wine Center, in New York, and North America's first female master.

All candidates follow a steady regimen of reading, tasting, talking to winemakers and other M.W.'s and poring over old exams.

Candidates are assigned a mentor, who reviews their studies and critiques their practice essays. Many form study groups, which help ease the expense of tracking down and tasting more than 1,000 wines a year.

In the Tuesday group, Ms. Simonetti wrangles bottles and finds rooms at Kobrand for informal seminars with wine experts. Mr. Newlin, an avid collector, pulls bottles from his cellar. Ms. Canterbury, formerly director of business development at the Italian Wine Merchants, a Manhattan retailer, contributes bottles from Italy. Ms. Reilly keeps tabs on wine tastings in the metropolitan region and organizes seminars with visiting winemakers. The agenda alternates between reviewing wine theory (a sample topic: "How can vineyard canopy management affect the quality of the wine?") and blind tastings under exam conditions.

"On the exam, you get an average of 11 minutes and 15 seconds for each wine," she said. "We give ourselves eight minutes to get used to the pressure." The 48 minutes pass in silence broken only by the sound of the wine tasters' typical slurping and the scratching of pens on paper. Afterward, the members discuss the wines.

When not tasting wine or writing about it, the group travels to wineries and schedules seminars with visiting winemakers. On a

An Exam Sampler

ALONG with tastings involving identifying grape type, region of origin and winemaking technique, the 2003 Master of Wine exam consisted of essay questions, including the following.

- How important is the role of the soil in producing high quality wine?
- Discuss the use of sulfur dioxide up to the end of the fermentation process. What alternatives to sulfur dioxide exist?
- You are the producer of a popular branded white wine and have received complaints from a large retail chain

that a bottle of your wine contains pieces of glass. What should you do about this?

- "Medals from wine shows and competitions are not worth the paper they are written on." Discuss.
- The days of innovation in wine are over. Discuss.
- Hygiene is a key issue in the production of sound wines. Discuss the techniques and materials used to maintain and improve hygiene performance, and other issues associated with cleaning, sanitation and sterilization, in the winery.



Nicolas Goldberg for The New York Times

HERBACEOUS? STEELY? Christy Canterbury takes detailed notes during a wine tasting.

recent trip to California, it visited a viticultural consultant and wine technologists. On weekends, it visits Long Island wineries. Last summer, Ms. Reilly found a teaching job in Switzerland that enabled her to explore the vineyards of France and Italy.

There are similar study groups around the country. One of the largest is organized by Melanie Wong, a health care executive in San Francisco. She has created a password-protected Web site that serves as a bulletin board and virtual discussion group for 20 candidates. Admission to the group (now closed) required applicants to send a three-page essay. "That separated the serious ones from the 'tourists,'" Ms. Wong said.

Despite its difficulty, officials at the institute insist that they want people to pass the exam. But candidates who fail three times must wait three years before taking it again. The greatest sins in the examiners' eyes, besides ignorance, are being boring and "waffling" — straying from the point. "Pedestrian writing doesn't hack it," said Bill Nesto, an M.W. from Boston. "You have to know the material and show flair and ingenuity under pressure."

To prepare for the exam, Ms. Ewing-Mulligan said, she studied from 5 to 7 a.m.

daily. "I carried wine magazines wherever I went and read 'Knowing and Making Wine' four times," she said, referring to a classic work by the Bordeaux enologist Emile Peynaud.

"You start to feel like a strange breed," Ms. Canterbury said. "For me, the biggest challenge isn't learning about wine; it's doing that and having a balanced life. My nonwine friends are concerned — they give me nonwine books to read to remind there is something else."

"I had to laugh," Ms. Reilly said, "when Jennifer came running up to me at a seminar to say she'd just found the 'greatest picture of the glassy-winged sharpshooter' — a vine pest — 'as though it were a hot new pair of shoes.'"

Does all this grim determination remove the romance and pleasure of the grape? When the Tuesday group quizzes a winemaker, there is little room for small talk. When Mr. Newlin countered a winemaker's anecdote with his own, Ms. Reilly cut him off, saying "Now's not the time, Flip."

The candidates say that examining a wine's finer points heightens enjoyment. "Wine is hedonism, it's pleasure," Ms. Wong says. "The exam is not."