

Man of the moment

With “elation and jubilation” at passing the world’s most rigorous wine exam, wine educator and founder of Taberna Wine Academy Tan Ying Hsien is now the first Singaporean Master of Wine, joining an elite group of just 340 MWs worldwide.

Your MW journey took six years. What were the ups and downs?

The whole process is strenuous and exhausting – when I took the closed book examinations, it comprised four theory papers (there are now five) and three practical (tasting examinations) papers. When I embarked in 2009, the part I dreaded most was the theory. As time went on, it was the practical tastings that ended up being my biggest hurdle.

I chose a research topic close to my heart (the history of a Grand Cru vineyard in Burgundy) that gave me the opportunity to meet wonderful people and drink good wine. It was especially gratifying that the research paper passed on first submission (unlike the three attempts at the theory exam and four at the tasting exam) this year.

Did you get invaluable advice from the community?

I received many generous words of wisdom from MWs such as my mentors (Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW, Annette Scarfe MW, Jane Skilton MW) and countless others. There was one comment that stuck: Jasper Morris MW suggested that I stop “over-intellectualising” the wines.

And what advice would you give?

Pursuing an MW is a rigorous, challenging programme and will demand considerable self-discipline, energy, sacrifice and money. Remember to have fun and engage positively with the programme and the people involved in it, no matter how many knocks one gets.

Did your early start in wines give you the necessary exposure, understanding and appreciation of wines?

I had the good fortune of knowing people who owned



wonderful collections of wine and who were generous, including pioneers in the wine scene here such as Dr N.K. Yong, Desmond Lim and Tan Kah Hin. But by the time I started the MW, I had lost touch with the good quality entry- and mid-market wines and this was where I had a lot of catching up to do. The MW practical exam tests you on 36 wines spread over three mornings – these come from all over the world, are at different price points, and can sometimes include obscure styles. So passing the exam demanded tasting more widely. The prices of fine wines today make it difficult to show the likes of Château Lafite-Rothschild (it has appeared in the past).

What fazes you when it comes to wine?

Bad wine. Badly stored wine. And poorly served wine. It makes me even more grumpy than I already naturally am.

You started Taberna while pursuing the MW, was this a help or distraction?

Taberna was both a help and a hindrance. It allowed me access to a wide range of wines and created fantastic opportunities to meet personalities. The hindrance was that, like all F&B outlets, it needed constant attention. Matters of regulatory licensing, staffing, rental costs, etc were significant enough issues that contributed to a poor performance at the 2012 examination.

What can we expect next from you?

The wine industry is very much my full-time occupation now and there is plenty that I think I can do to help the industry reach a higher level of excellence and in the course of doing so, put Singapore more significantly on the world wine map. >