

Singapore gets its first Master of Wine



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BY DON MENDOZA - SEPTEMBER 9

SINGAPORE — They are considered the cream of the crop when it comes to wine knowledge, with only 340 members from 24 countries since it was introduced in 1953. And for the first time, a Singaporean has made it onto the exclusive Masters of Wine (MW) list.

Wine journalist, speaker and educator Tan Ying Hsien was one of the 19 new MW announced by the Institute of Masters of Wine earlier this week. “It was a very emotional moment when I received the news by telephone from the executive director of the Institute of Masters of Wine that I had passed all the requirements to be eligible to join the Institute as a Master of Wine,” said Tan.

On being the first Singaporean to become an MW and represent his country on the global stage in the world of wine (on its Jubilee year at that), he said: “In its small way, it is something that I hope will add to the growing recognition of Singapore’s success — in cultural terms as well as economic.

“Wine may seem to be an odd way to do it, but I feel that as Singapore matures as a country, its growth is not merely a matter of bread and butter economics and issues, but also an expanding sophistication and graciousness in its society and the appreciation of wine is one tiny aspect of that.”

Tan, who started tasting and studying wine while pursuing university studies in the United Kingdom in 1983, is the owner of Taberna Wine Academy. He has been a judge at the International Wine Challenges in Singapore and at the Decanter Asia Wine Awards in Hong Kong. This year, he was also a member of the jury at the 5th Singapore National Sommelier Competition.

Becoming an MW wasn’t easy, Tan said. “It has been a long, arduous journey, which I started in November 2009, that required a phenomenal investment of energy, time and perseverance, marked by many disappointments along the way,” he said, describing the exams as “one of the toughest qualifications in the world to get”, one that encompasses theory and practical examinations as well as an original research paper. The new MWs comprise 11 women and eight men hailing from 10 countries, which, aside from Singapore, also include the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, Germany, among others.

The exam to become an MW is widely regarded as a demanding programme that is “designed to test the breadth and depth of a candidate’s theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the art, science and business of wine”. Its exclusive membership list includes winemakers, buyers, journalists, shippers, business owners, consultants, academics and wine educators.

What makes Tan’s achievement even more impressive is his initial lack of professional experience when he first decided to join the programme. “It never even occurred to me to join the programme — I was a corporate and banking lawyer by profession and had spent more than 20 years of my working life working in law practices and international banks. But I always had a passion for wine as a hobby, being somewhat of a wine geek, and pretty much devoting almost all my holidays and spare time to tasting wine and visiting wine regions,” he said.

The suggestion to try and become one was broached in 2008 by Lisa Perrotti-Brown, the first MW to be based in Singapore. “I realised that getting the qualification would not only be a personal achievement, but was something that I could use to help the wine profession along in Singapore and drive a move towards a better level of excellence in the wine trade and service industry here, and potentially consolidating Singapore’s position as a food and wine mecca.”

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