

ASI MAGAZINE

JUNE 2025
ISSUE #21



The Rising Palate:
**TASTING TRENDS
ACROSS
ASIA**



LEADING VOICES
Reeze Choi, Satoru Mori

**ASIA'S NEWEST
GOLD DIPLOMA HOLDERS**
Jai Singh, Mari Miyazaki,
Shirley Tan, Yi Ying Yong



ASI BOOT CAMP

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Welcome!



*William Wouters,
President ASI*

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

The Rising Sun of Sommellerie

It is with great pride and enthusiasm that I introduce this edition of ASI Magazine, dedicated to one of the most exciting developments in our global community: the remarkable rise of sommellerie in Asia.

Over the past decade, Asia has transformed into a hotbed of sommelier talent, driven by an unshakable passion for excellence, deepening educational structures, and an increasingly diverse and vibrant beverage culture. The energy and ambition we see across the region are not only inspiring but redefining what it means to be a sommelier in the 21st century.

This year promises to be a landmark one for Asian sommellerie. We eagerly anticipate the **ASI Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific** competition in Malaysia which will shine a spotlight on the incredible depth of talent across this vast and varied region. Just as we witnessed the world take note of Reeze Choi of Hong Kong—who earned a well-deserved podium finish at the **2023 ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World** in Paris—this regional championship will undoubtedly reveal even more rising stars ready to take their place on the international stage.

We are equally thrilled to bring the ASI Bootcamp back to Asia this year, further strengthening the bridge between global knowledge and local expertise. ASI Bootcamp is not only a space for skill-building but also for fostering lifelong friendships and mentorships across borders.

It exemplifies ASI's mission:
TO CREATE A TRULY
CONNECTED,
COLLABORATIVE,
AND EVOLVING
GLOBAL SOMMELIER
COMMUNITY.

“Over the past decade, Asia has transformed into a hotbed of sommelier talent, driven by an unshakable passion for excellence.”



Volunteers at 2022 ASI Bootcamp (Photo: Andy Kho)

William Wouters, President ASI



“From the elegance of premium sake to the perfume of Japanese koshu, the complexity of Indian whiskies, and the introduction of the structured reds of Ningxia.”

None of this momentum would be possible without the tireless efforts of regional leaders—people like **Shinya Tasaki**, a true pioneer and global ambassador for Asian sommellerie, **Saiko Tamura**, and **Satoru Mori** of Japan, who have all inspired many to reach higher. Satoru Mori shares his insights on the current and future of sommellerie in Asian. While Japan, Hong Kong and China have long been leaders of sommellerie in the region, we are seeing rapid growth of sommellerie with Singapore, Korea, Malaysia and more all experiencing growth. The outward expansion has even led to the development of sommellerie in places such as India, where leaders such as **Amrita Singh** and **Jai Singh**, are inspiring others to dream. In this issue we interview Jai Singh on the eve of his triumph at the Best Sommelier of India competition and immediately following him becoming only the second person from India to attain ASI Diploma Gold.

Asia is not only nurturing top-level sommeliers—it’s also expanding the sommelier world’s palate. From the elegance of premium sake to the perfume of Japanese koshu, the complexity of Indian whiskies, and the introduction of the structured reds of Ningxia, the region’s own wine and beverage cultures are becoming essential components of any sommelier’s education. This year saw an incredibly high percentage of those earning ASI Diploma Gold coming from Asia. We interview several of them in this edition to understand their journey. We are also witnessing how a new interest in sake and Asian wines on international wine lists continues to grow—a clear sign of Asia’s influence and integration into the heart of global wine service.

As we celebrate these successes and look forward to the events ahead, let us all take inspiration from Asia’s example: a story of persistence, collaboration, and limitless curiosity.

In My Glass



Mark DeWolf
 Mark DeWolf, Content Manager ASI
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Rising Stars: The State of Sommellerie in Asia

Admittedly, I have never travelled to Asia. My journeys have historically revolved around the vinous exploits of countries in Western Europe, South Africa, South America, and North America. However, during my time as editor of ASI Magazine, I have come to realise that the ever-expanding world of wine and other beverages is experiencing remarkable growth in Asia. While I may lack first-hand knowledge, the passion of sommeliers such as **Reeze Choi**—who has taken the leap to become a part-time winemaker in Japan—makes this evolution undeniable.

The rise of Asian wines, particularly those from China, Japan, and to a lesser extent India and Thailand, along with a renewed interest in traditional beverages like sake, is both exciting and transformative. Regions such as Ningxia in China, Yamanashi in Japan, and Nashik in India are producing wines that garner international accolades and intrigue sommeliers both within Asia and increasingly abroad. Their unique terroirs and styles are adding diversity and richness to global wine lists.

While wine production has risen in the region, the transformation of the sake industry is perhaps even more striking. Sake has evolved from being a ubiquitous offering

“A beverage that might once have been relegated to backbar status is now finding a home on the beverage lists of many of the world’s finest restaurants—from Tokyo to New York.”

in Japanese restaurants to becoming a global superstar among sommeliers. A beverage that might once have been relegated to backbar status is now finding a home on the beverage lists of many of the world’s finest restaurants—from Tokyo to New York. Look out for our guide to pairing sake styles with food in this issue of ASI Magazine.

Asia’s rapid emergence as a dynamic force in the world of wine and beverage is perhaps most evident in the region’s growing excellence in sommellerie. Once considered peripheral to traditional European centres of wine culture, Asia is now a focal point of innovation, education, and

talent—reflected in the remarkable achievements of its sommeliers on the global stage.

A defining moment came at the ASI Best Sommelier of the World 2023 competition in Paris, where Hong Kong’s **Reeze Choi** placed third—an extraordinary accomplishment that captured international attention. Not since Japanese sommelier superstar **Shinya Tasaki’s** historic 1995 victory at the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World has an Asian sommelier made such an impact. Choi’s journey—from humble beginnings in food service to standing on the podium at one of the profession’s most prestigious competitions—is emblematic of a larger narrative:

the rise of highly skilled, deeply passionate sommeliers from across Asia who are reshaping the global wine conversation.

We asked Choi to discuss the state of sommellerie in Asia, as well as trends in Hong Kong. Another superstar of Asian sommellerie is **Satoru Mori**. Mori's passion for wine is equalled by his love for local Japanese beverages (wine and sake). We couldn't think of anyone more suited to discuss the current state of sommellerie, local wine, and sake in Japan and throughout Asia than Satoru himself.

The inspiration provided by Choi, Tasaki, and Satoru is evident in the growing professionalism of sommeliers across the region, showcased by the 2024 ASI Diploma results. Asian sommeliers made up a notably high percentage of recipients of the prestigious ASI Diploma Gold. Countries such as Japan, China, South Korea, and Singapore have seen a surge in Diploma candidates, reflecting the deepening educational infrastructure throughout the region. Institutions and educators are increasingly providing rigorous, multilingual training—helping to level the playing field and empowering Asian sommeliers to succeed on the international stage.

Cheers

Mark DeWolf



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Guest Editors

SATORU MORI, REEZE CHOI



Satoru Mori

Satoru Mori:
storytellers
connecting
tradition,
innovation,
and a sense
of place

A DISCUSSION WITH...

In the evolving landscape of global gastronomy, Japan has emerged as a formidable presence in the realm of wine and beverage expertise. Central to this ascent is **Satoru Mori**, a distinguished figure whose career epitomises the fusion of tradition and innovation in Japanese sommellerie.

Mori's journey is marked by a series of accolades that underscore his expertise and dedication. He was honored as Japan's Best Sommelier in 2008 and subsequently clinched the title of ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Oceania in 2009. His commitment to excellence propelled him to the global stage,

where he secured an impressive top ten finish at the 2016 ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World in Mendoza, Argentina.

Beyond competitions, Mori has significantly contributed to the dissemination of wine knowledge in Japan. As the Executive Sommelier and Beverage Director at Andaz Tokyo, he has been instrumental in elevating the wine culture within the hospitality industry. His role extends to education and mentorship, fostering a new generation of sommeliers through his involvement with the Japan Sommelier Association.

In recognition of his contributions, Mori received the "Contemporary Master Craftsman (Gendai no Meiko)" award in 2017 and the Medal with Yellow Ribbon in 2022, honors bestowed upon individuals who exemplify exceptional skill and dedication in their professions.

In this exclusive interview with the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI), Satoru Mori offers insights into the current state of sommellerie in Japan, reflecting on its rapid growth, the cultural nuances influencing its development, and the future trajectory of wine appreciation in the country.

Satoru Mori and Reeze Choi

ASI: How would you describe the current state of sommellerie in Japan?

Satoru Mori (SM): Sommellerie in Japan has seen remarkable growth, both in terms of public appreciation and professional development. Behind much of this success is the Japan Sommelier Association (JSA) which has played a key role in advancing the field. To support this, the JSA provides rigorous training and certification programmes, upholding high standards within the industry. They have also made international collaborations, such as those with the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI), which have also helped Japanese sommeliers gain recognition on the global stage.

This would all be for not, if there wasn't also increased public interest in wine and sake. In recent years in Japan, this has expanded beyond traditional European imports. There's been a notable rise in appreciation for Japanese wines and sake. As the general public becomes more knowledgeable—thanks to greater access to tastings, wine bars, and educational initiatives—sommeliers are held in high regard, particularly in fine dining, where their expertise is viewed as integral to the overall experience.

ASI: What major changes have you observed in consumer preferences or market dynamics over the past decade?

SM: Japan's wine market has undergone significant changes in consumer preferences and market dynamics in the past ten years. Some of the most notable developments include:

The Rise of E-Commerce and Direct-to-Consumer Sales

Online wine sales have grown considerably, with major retailers and wineries adopting direct-to-consumer models. Subscription-based wine services and curated online selections are also gaining popularity.

Growing Popularity of Japanese Wines

Domestic wines, particularly from regions such as Yamanashi, Nagano, and Hokkaido, are attracting more attention. Consumers are developing an appreciation for native grape varieties like Koshu and Muscat Bailey A.

Shift Towards Sustainable and Natural Wines

There's a growing demand for organic, biodynamic, and low-intervention wines. Japanese

wineries are increasingly adopting sustainable viticulture practices to align with global trends.

Changing Demographics and Consumption Patterns

The ageing population continues to be a key driver of wine consumption, with those over 40 representing the largest demographic. At the same time, younger consumers are showing more interest in non-alcoholic and lower-alcohol wines, reflecting broader interest in health-conscious lifestyles.

Influence of Trade Agreements

The EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) has made European wines more accessible, contributing to a resurgence in Old World imports. Chilean wines remain popular due to favourable trade agreements, though competition from European producers is increasing.

“The JSA provides rigorous training and certification programmes, upholding high standards within the industry.”





ASI: Has the growth of wine culture in neighbouring countries influenced sommeliers in Japan? Are there more regional exchanges and collaboration today than in the past?

SM: Absolutely. The rise of wine culture in neighbouring countries has positively influenced sommeliers in Japan, fostering greater regional exchange and collaboration.

For example, South Korea has experienced a surge in wine appreciation, which has led to more cross-border tastings and educational programmes. I personally have close ties with sommeliers in Korea and elsewhere in Asia—we frequently exchange ideas and help each other grow.

Japanese wineries such as Mercian and Miyoshi Winery have also collaborated with sommeliers from Hong Kong, including Mr. Reeze Choi, sharing knowledge on viticulture and winemaking.

I believe it's important for Japanese sommeliers and wineries to continue building these relationships, especially within Asia, to strengthen mutual understanding and elevate the profession across the region.

ASI: The ASI has been expanding its presence and support in Asia. What impact do you think ASI initiatives have had on sommeliers in Japan and the broader region?

SM: The ASI has had a significant impact on sommeliers in Japan and throughout Asia, particularly through its efforts in professional development, international collaboration, and the promotion of wine and sake expertise.

Japanese sommeliers now have increased access to international competitions and training programmes, such as the ASI Best Sommelier of Asia & Oceania and

the ASI Bootcamp. These initiatives provide valuable experience and networking opportunities.

ASI's presence has also helped raise the global profile of Japanese wines and sake, integrating them more fully into international fine dining—not just within the context of Japanese cuisine. At the same time, initiatives like the ASI Bootcamp are equipping junior sommeliers with specialised training, helping to cultivate the next generation of talent.

Overall, ASI's work is encouraging sommeliers across Asia to explore a broader range of styles and pairings, and to engage more confidently on the global stage.

ASI: Do you feel the new generation of sommeliers in Japan approaches the profession differently than previous ones—in terms of style, knowledge, or international outlook?

SM: Yes, the new generation of Japanese sommeliers is redefining the profession with fresh perspectives on style, knowledge, and global engagement.

They tend to adopt a more approachable and interactive service style, moving away from traditional formality. Storytelling plays a bigger role now—young sommeliers often share the history and philosophy behind a wine to create a deeper, more engaging experience for guests. They're also more willing to explore natural, biodynamic, and lesser-known varietals beyond the classic European wines. Many are studying abroad or participating in international competitions, gaining valuable exposure to diverse wine cultures.

ASI has been instrumental in supporting these exchanges, allowing young sommeliers in Japan to collaborate with their peers across Asia and beyond.



ASI: Sake has long been the national drink of Japan, but it seems to be undergoing a transformation both at home and abroad. Do you think the internal perception of sake is changing as quickly and dramatically as it is externally?

SM: Sake is indeed undergoing a transformation both domestically and internationally, although the pace of change differs.

Globally, sake is gaining prestige in fine dining, with Michelin-starred restaurants incorporating it into sophisticated pairing menus. Exports have risen significantly, especially to markets like China, the U.S., and Europe. Brewers are also innovating with sparkling sake and aged varieties to appeal to international tastes.

Domestically, however, sake faces challenges. While it remains a deeply rooted cultural beverage, its consumption has declined over the decades. Younger generations are gravitating toward beer, whisky, and wine. To address this, breweries are developing low-alcohol and flavoured sakes aimed at new audiences, and many are embracing modern branding and marketing to make sake more accessible.

“Sake is increasingly featured alongside wine in pairing menus, illustrating its versatility far beyond traditional cuisine.”

ASI: Japanese wine is gaining some attention on the global stage. What do you think are its greatest strengths, and what challenges still lie ahead for producers hoping to expand both within Japan and abroad?

SM: Japanese wine is making meaningful progress internationally, but producers face both exciting opportunities and clear challenges.

Strengths

- **Unique Terroir and Indigenous Varietals:** Japan’s distinct climate and soils yield wines with delicate acidity and refined character, particularly from Koshu and Muscat Bailey A.
- **High-Quality Standards:** Japanese winemaking is marked by precision and craftsmanship, resulting in high consistency and quality.
- **Cultural Integration:** Japanese wines pair beautifully with our cuisine, which makes them a natural fit for fine dining worldwide.

Challenges

- **Limited Production Volume:** Japan’s wine production remains relatively small, making it difficult to scale exports.
- **Global Recognition:** Although growing, Japanese wine still lacks the prestige of more established regions like France or Italy.
- **Market Competition:** Japanese producers must compete with both Old and New World wines, which dominate many international markets.
- **Distribution and Branding:** Successful global expansion requires strategic partnerships with importers and strong branding initiatives.

ASI: Do you see a new sense of pride of Japanese produced products emerging in the Japanese restaurant scene?

SM: Striking the balance between international wines and native beverages like sake and Japanese wine has become a defining part of a sommelier’s role in Japan. Many of us are embracing terroir-driven storytelling to present both domestic and international options in a meaningful way.

Sommeliers today are curating hybrid wine lists that combine renowned international labels with Japanese wines showcasing local terroir. Sake is increasingly featured alongside wine in pairing menus, illustrating its versatility far beyond traditional cuisine. The concept of terroir is being skilfully applied to sake, reinforcing its authenticity and connection to Japan’s landscape.

The introduction of Geographical Indications (GI) for Japanese wine and sake has played a major role in elevating their profile, highlighting regional identity and quality. Restaurants are also sourcing locally more than ever, featuring wines from Yamanashi, Nagano, and Hokkaido alongside international selections.

This shift reflects a new and growing pride in our native beverages—and as sommeliers, we are proud to be storytellers connecting tradition, innovation, and a sense of place.

COCOON SERIES



Reeze Choi

A DISCUSSION WITH...

The State of Sommellerie in Hong Kong

With Reeze Choi

Reeze Choi is one of Asia's most respected sommeliers, known for his thoughtful approach, and dedication to the craft of wine and beverage service. Based in Hong Kong, Reeze has earned acclaim on the global stage, culminating in placing third at the ASI Content Best Sommelier of the World 2023, which took place in Paris. Choi additionally holds the title of ASI Diploma Gold and is an Advanced Sommelier with the Court of Master Sommeliers. Choi's story is one of hard work and perseverance. He worked his way up the restaurant ladder, starting as a waiter, and eventually attaining the title sommelier, working at the likes of *L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon*, Van Gogh Senses and PIIN Wine Restaurant before opening his own consultancy, Somm's Philosophy.

Beyond competitions and life in the restaurant world, Reeze can also now be found in the vineyards and in the winery, as winemaker for Project 933, a collaboration with Hiroshima (Japan) based Vinoble Vineyard & Winery and Kenneth Lee – founder of The Time Sommelier. With such a diverse background Choi brings unique insights into market trends, consumer behaviour, and regional opportunities. In this interview with ASI, Reeze shares his perspectives on the current state of sommellerie in Hong Kong, and the broader region.

"As a result of this increasing wealth of options, I've observed a significant improvement in the quality of sommeliers in Asia over the past decade."

ASI: What challenges and opportunities do aspiring sommeliers in Asia face in terms of education and certification?

Reeze Choi (RZ): Education is becoming increasingly global, and tools like the internet and AI are now widely accessible. I don't think Asian sommeliers face more challenges than those in Western

countries. In fact, Asia's lack of traditional wine production has led to incredible opportunity, particularly as it relates to the diversity in wine offerings. Visit any Asian country and you'll find

wine lists featuring a wide array of regions from across the world. This availability of product actually makes it easier for sommeliers here to access wines for training and study. As a result of this increasing wealth of options, I've observed a significant improvement in the quality of sommeliers in Asia over the past decade.

“These programmes represent great opportunities to support young sommeliers with potential.”

ASI: ASI has invested in bootcamps in Asia and promoted the ASI Diploma. Are you seeing increased awareness of ASI among the sommelier community in the region?

RZ: In some countries and associations—such as Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore—there has been strong promotion of ASI programmes. These associations actively encourage their sommeliers to participate in the Diploma. For the bootcamps, some even use voting or competitions to select candidates. However, there are still many associations that haven't done enough to promote these opportunities. These programmes represent great opportunities to support young sommeliers with potential, and it's disappointing when they're underutilised.

ASI: When it comes to preferences, how are wines from classic regions like Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Champagne performing in Hong Kong and other Asian markets?

RZ: As I mentioned earlier there is an ever-widening list of wines available here. While some classic regions – particularly Burgundy and Champagne – continue to thrive, the younger generation tends to





be more exploratory and open to wines from a broader range of countries. This is opening some doors to newer wine regions. This isn't necessarily a slight to classic regions. This movement is largely price-driven. The Hong Kong market is very sensitive to price, and consumers, regardless of age, are tending to look for wines that offer good quality at a more affordable price point.

ASI: In our last edition of ASI Magazine, we focused on natural and sustainable wines. What is the status of the natural wine movement in Hong Kong?

RZ: The natural wine movement certainly hasn't gained as much traction in Hong Kong as it has in many other countries, particularly as compared to North America and Western Europe. While you can occasionally find natural wines listed in distributor catalogues and on wine lists here, there are only a

handful of wine bars and retailers that specifically label themselves as "natural" wine bars/shops explicitly promote wines under that banner.

That said, we are seeing some natural wines appearing in sustainable lifestyle shops across the city. Natural is very much aligned to healthy living here, and in Hong Kong, the largest segment of wine consumers here aren't necessarily those who subscribe to a sustainable lifestyle. This in contrast to markets like Japan, where natural wine has found a foothold either as a cause or a trend among the younger generation. It seems to hold less appeal in Hong Kong.

ASI: Do you think sustainability practices are being adopted by sommeliers and restaurants in Hong Kong and across Asia?

RZ: Unfortunately, many sustainability practices have yet to be widely adopted or even become

adoptable within the wine industry in Hong Kong. The feasibility of implementing more sustainable approaches to buying, selling, and serving wine depends heavily on community support and government policy. Ultimately, recycling measures need to be seamlessly integrated into the daily operations of restaurants and bars in order to encourage participation without creating additional burdens.

Alternative wine packaging formats are not yet widely available here. However, I believe these formats—particularly for more casual wines—will gradually gain acceptance due to their lower transportation costs. In terms of wine selection, I don't think sustainability plays a major role in shaping choices in Hong Kong or Asia at large. This is partly due to geographic limitations and the market's enduring preference for wines from Europe and the United States.

ASI: Is there a regional, buy local movement happening in Hong Kong?

RZ: Absolutely, there is an increasing interest amongst sommeliers for wines from countries such as Japan, China, Thailand, and India. Wines from these countries are starting to gain more recognition, especially those from more established producers in China and Japan. As both a sommelier and an Asian wine producer myself, I hope to see more Asian sommeliers appreciate the quality and potential of our regional wines—and help promote them to the world. While recognition is coming and more and more Asian wines appearing on wine lists, there's still a lot of room for growth, which is exciting.

P+S

PRATS & SYMINGTON

Prats & Symington was founded in 1999 as a joint venture between the well known Bordeaux winemaker, Bruno Prats and the Symington family. This partnership specialises in dry red wines which have been at the forefront of the DOC Douro quality revolution and has been instrumental in driving forward the high quality image of the region.

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Reaching New Heights: welcoming the first ASI Gold Diploma flight attendant

FEATURE ARTICLE

Reaching New Heights: welcoming the first
ASI Gold Diploma flight attendant



Mari Miyazaki

Mari Miyazaki is flying high after attaining her ASI Diploma Gold certification. Not only is Miyazaki the first Japanese airline steward to achieve the prestigious ASI Diploma Gold, but she is also likely the only one in the world. This elite certification, awarded by the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale, is a rare honour even among seasoned sommeliers. Miyazaki's accomplishment not only marks a personal triumph but also sets a new benchmark for excellence in in-flight hospitality. Her journey reflects a fusion of dedication to service and a deep passion for oenology, challenging traditional boundaries within the airline industry. As she continues to elevate the passenger experience, Miyazaki's story serves as an inspiring testament to the heights that can be reached through commitment and innovation.



“I felt a strong desire to pursue deeper hospitality and was drawn to the idea of using wine to create emotional impact for customers within the limited time and environment of an aircraft.”

ASI: Describe your journey to becoming a sommelier. What made you decide this was an achievement or career path you wished to undertake?

Mari Miyazaki (MM): I first became interested in wine when a friend invited me to a wine party hosted by Japanese actor Takuro Tatsumi. At the time, I tasted a German sweet wine, *Piesporter Goldtröpfchen*, and its rich flavour left me amazed, thinking, “Is wine really this delicious?” I didn’t even know whether *Piesporter Goldtröpfchen* referred to the wine, the vineyard, or the producer, so I would go to wine shops and ask, “Do you have Piesporter?”

Later, my colleagues started preparing for the sommelier exam, and I decided to study casually for it, thinking, “If they’re doing it, I might as well too.” At the time, I was content with simply obtaining the sommelier certification and

had no intention of pursuing higher qualifications. However, as my passion for wine grew stronger, my desire to learn more increased.

After obtaining my sommelier certification, I happened to see the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World in Greece on TV and was deeply impressed by Yoichi Sato, who was representing Japan. “There’s such an amazing sommelier in Japan?” I immediately visited the restaurant where he worked, Maxivin in Tokyo, and was deeply moved by his knowledge, service, and conversational skills.

However, at the time, I felt that restaurant sommeliers and airline cabin crew sommeliers were in completely different worlds. I had a sense of hesitation and inferiority, thinking, “We are merely ‘certificate holders’ who just take the exam.” Even after experiencing Mr. Sato’s service firsthand and being

overwhelmed by his advanced skills and hospitality, I still felt that restaurant sommeliers were in a different league, and the world of top sommeliers remained a dream for me.

One day, I came across a post on an online forum stating, “Cabin attendants attend wine school just for fun,” and “They get the sommelier certification and that’s it.” That comment filled me with frustration. I was determined to prove that even a cabin attendant could earn advanced certifications. Fuelled by that determination, I took the next step and challenged the Sommelier Excellence Exam by the Japan Sommelier Association.

In the Sommelier Excellence Exam, I struggled with the practical service portion and thought, “I’m not working in a restaurant, so it’s no wonder I can’t do it.” However, when I found out that one of the



the restricted environment of an aircraft and provide passengers with a more fulfilling experience.

ASI: You're the only ASI-certified cabin attendant in Japan—a remarkable achievement. How has your role at Japan Airlines influenced or shaped your sommelier journey?

MM: My experience as a cabin attendant at JAL has had a significant impact on my growth as a sommelier. The aircraft cabin is a different environment from a restaurant on the ground. For safety reasons, we are not allowed to carry sommelier knives; there are no decanters, and only one type of wine glass is available. There are no wine cellars with stable temperature and humidity, so we use ice packs and dry ice to chill wines. We also face unique challenges, such as serving in a dark cabin during night flights or during turbulence. Moreover, since we cannot consume alcohol while on duty, we must provide accurate service based on prior research and past tasting experiences, which requires a high level of expertise.

On board, we spend up to 14 hours with passengers. Wine service is not merely about pouring drinks; it is an important tool for building rapport. We must be sensitive to passengers' expressions and subtle changes, adjusting our service accordingly. This requires great flexibility and the ability to respond intuitively. It is a setting where comprehensive hospitality, involving all five senses, is essential.

As cabin attendants, we are entrusted with the lives of our passengers, and safety is always our top priority. However, we also believe it is important to strive to provide wine service that enriches the passenger experience. We aim to offer a service that goes beyond simply serving drinks, so the wine becomes a memorable part of their journey.

"We aim to offer a service that goes beyond simply serving drinks, so the wine becomes a memorable part of their journey."

successful candidates was a liquor store employee, I felt ashamed of myself for making excuses. This experience made me realise once again that skills can be acquired through effort, and it marked a major turning point in my approach to learning.

Furthermore, having my paternal relative, Shin Miyazaki, who won the Coupe Georges Baptiste Service World Competition, close by allowed me to witness hospitality and advanced service skills firsthand. This helped refine my perspective as a wine professional. Over time, as I gained experience as a cabin attendant, I felt a strong desire to pursue deeper hospitality and was drawn to the idea of using wine to create emotional impact for customers within the limited time and environment of an aircraft. I decided that I wanted to acquire more advanced expertise.

After passing the Sommelier Excellence Exam, I began studying for the WSET to further enhance my knowledge and skills. Last year, I obtained the WSET Diploma and this year, the ASI Gold qualification. My goal is not simply to hold these qualifications, but to confidently convey the appeal of wine within



Reaching New Heights: welcoming the first ASI Gold Diploma flight attendant

Japan Airlines' wine advisor is Motohiro Okoshi, an experienced sommelier. He supervises the wine lists in international lounges and on board, and provides advice on pairing wines with in-flight meals. Under his guidance, we've gained insight into the unique techniques of in-flight wine service and are able to select wines and offer service based on solid knowledge and experience. Wine service plays an important role in enhancing the brand value of Japan Airlines.

ASI: Balancing the rigours of airline service with intense study for the ASI Gold Diploma is no small feat. What personal strategies or mindset helped you manage these dual commitments?

MM: Studying for the ASI Gold Diploma while working in aviation was not easy. The most important thing was to make the most of my limited time and steadily tackle each task one step at a time.

I also ensured that I used free time between work and commuting effectively. On days off, I used spare moments to gradually build up my wine knowledge. Adjusting to time zone differences during international flights was a major challenge. To continue studying despite sleep deprivation and fatigue, I sometimes stayed in my hotel room in Paris or New York to focus on study. Even with limited time, maintaining concentration and consistency was key to passing the exam.

However, I didn't spend all my time confined to hotels. During international layovers I visited local wine shops, wineries, and Michelin-starred restaurants, where I could learn through first-class service experiences. I feel very fortunate to have had these opportunities. Immersing myself in these environments deepened my understanding of wine selection and service.

Last year, I had to take the ASI Diploma exam with a broken leg and was unable to complete the practical service portion. I received Bronze certification, but I was determined to achieve Gold the following year. I retook the ASI exam this year and successfully earned Gold certification. This experience taught me the importance of resilience and determination even in difficult circumstances.

ASI: Do you see the ASI Diploma and WSET certifications as complementary? What was the most challenging aspect of the ASI Diploma Gold exam for you, and how did you overcome it?

MM: Yes, I believe the ASI Diploma and WSET certifications are highly complementary. The WSET provides a comprehensive understanding of wine theory and systematic knowledge, enabling learners to progress step by step. By studying the winemaking process, regional characteristics, and tasting techniques systematically, we develop logical, analytical thinking. In contrast, the ASI Diploma tests practical and service skills, assessing how well we apply our knowledge in real-world scenarios.

It evaluates wine service techniques, food pairing decisions, and guest service abilities, demanding quick thinking and high standards of hospitality. Possessing both qualifications has enhanced my capabilities as a well-rounded sommelier. The systematic knowledge from WSET forms a strong foundation, while the practical skills from ASI allow me to apply that knowledge effectively.

Joining the Facebook group WSET Diploma Worldwide Study Group allowed me to exchange ideas with global candidates. In particular, Alex Tsui DipWSET, the group leader and recipient of the Vintners' Cup, shared invaluable insights into logical thinking and knowledge organisation. The cooperative nature of the group also contributed greatly to my learning.

Studying for both qualifications deepened my understanding of both theory and practice. However, in Japan, awareness of ASI and WSET is still relatively low. Currently, only four individuals—including myself—hold both the ASI Gold and WSET Diploma: Rie Matsuki (intertWine K×M), Minobu Kondo



(NIKI Hills), and Takehiro Oide (The Okura Tokyo).

The most challenging aspect of the ASI Gold exam was the practical service component. Without restaurant experience, mastering service techniques through self-study was especially difficult. As sommelier knives are not allowed on board, I practised basic service movements repeatedly at home to improve my precision.

To compensate for my lack of restaurant experience, I actively visited fine dining establishments and studied the service of top sommeliers. In particular, I visited Taku Iguro (L'Osier, a Michelin three-star restaurant in Tokyo), who won the Best Sommelier Competition in Japan. His knowledge, service, and conversational skills taught me not just about wine service, but about communication and hospitality at the highest level.

ASI: As someone breaking new ground in a unique professional setting, what message would you like to share with others—particularly airline professionals—interested in advanced wine education? Do you believe more onboard sommeliers could enhance First Class service?

MM: The cabin is a unique setting, distinct from ground-based restaurants. Our ability to deliver exceptional wine experiences within its constraints is what makes this role special. To aviation professionals interested in wine education, I emphasise the importance of expanding one's horizons and challenging conventional boundaries.

In Japan, it's not uncommon for airline crew to become sommeliers, with over 100 taking the exam each year. Japan Airlines likely has the highest number of sommeliers in a single company in Japan. Cabin crew with wine knowledge not



only enhance in-flight service but also contribute to the airline's brand. I've established a wine study group within the company to share information and deepen our knowledge together.

As cabin crew, we are responsible for passenger safety above all. However, I also believe it is equally important to offer wine service that provides passengers with a rich and memorable experience. Only in a safe environment can elegant and refined service truly shine.

For First Class passengers especially, we can provide a more personalised experience. Wine is not merely a beverage—it can become part of a lasting memory. To create such moments, I've introduced a special gesture: after the service, I remove the wine label from the bottle the passenger enjoyed and write a message on a label collector, which I present to them. I hope it serves as a keepsake of their journey. If wine can enhance the special moments of a trip, its value in the air becomes even more significant.

Additionally, we can introduce Japanese wine and sake to passengers from around the world. Through pairings with Japanese cuisine, we can share the richness of our wine and food culture with travellers—especially those merely transiting through Japan. Airlines have a unique opportunity to promote culture, and Japan Airlines can be a platform for sharing Japanese wine and sake with the world.

As a cabin attendant, I believe I can fulfil my mission of ensuring safety while also creating meaningful wine experiences. With around 8,000 cabin attendants at Japan Airlines, I hope more will become onboard sommeliers, sharing the beauty of Japanese wine, sake, and culture worldwide. Wine has the power to connect people and create memories—it is more than a drink. I will continue to share its charm in the sky and explore new possibilities as a sommelier.



JAPAN
SAKE AND SHOCHU
MAKERS
ASSOCIATION

Honkaku Shochu and Awamori: Japan's National Spirits

Across Asia, each country has its own traditional distilled spirits rooted in local climate and cuisine. In Japan, honkaku shochu and awamori are officially recognised as kokushu, or national spirits, alongside the country's national fermented drink, sake. Domestic shochu consumption is comparable to sake's, and its reputation abroad is growing. Major export destinations are China, South Korea, Taiwan, and the U.S., and exports are expanding in Europe. Shochu is especially gaining attention in the global bar scene, where its diverse and distinctive flavors inspire mixologists.

Shochu's flavor is shaped by three key elements: koji, diverse raw ingredients, and single distillation.



1. Koji

Koji mold is essential for converting starches into fermentable sugars. Shochu uses primarily black and white koji, which produce citric acid to help prevent bacterial contamination during fermentation. Black koji draws out bold, ingredient-driven flavors, while white koji brings a gentler profile. Awamori uses only black koji, and aged varieties (over three years) develop a vanilla-like aroma from vanillin, despite no barrel aging, making them reminiscent of whiskey.

2. Diverse Base Ingredients

Unlike sake, which is made only from rice, shochu is made from various starchy ingredients: most commonly barley, rice, sweet potatoes, and buckwheat, each offering unique aromatic profiles. For example, sweet potato shochu includes β -damascenone, also found in brandy, with rose and berry notes, and monoterpene alcohols that evoke lychee and muscat. Production is intensely regional; in South Kyushu's volcanic Satsuma area, known for cultivating sweet potatoes, sweet potato shochu is protected under Japan's Geographical Indication (GI) system.



3. Single Distillation

Shochu is distilled once using stainless steel pot stills, preserving the mash's character. Unlike whiskey's double copper distillation, this method retains flavor complexity. Two approaches, atmospheric and vacuum, produce different profiles, with vacuum distillation at 40–50°C yielding lighter, fruitier notes. Distillates typically start at 38–42% ABV and are diluted to 20–25% for bottling.

Traditionally served with meals and diluted with water, soda, or hot water, honkaku shochu and awamori are poised to gain greater global recognition as umami-rich, versatile spirits with a distinctly Japanese identity.



Jai Singh: India's Top Sommm Achieves Gold standard



Jai Singh

Jai Singh is part of a new wave of Indian sommeliers making their mark on the global wine stage. Jai began his career in food and beverage service as waiter before discovering a deeper passion for wine during the pandemic lockdown of 2020. What began as self-guided study quickly evolved into a professional calling, fuelled by curiosity, discipline, and a love of storytelling.

Now based in Italy, where he lives with his wife Paola in the small agricultural town of Corato in Puglia, Jai has immersed himself in the local wine culture, which he describes as “sacred.” Through the support of his wife, the Gerard Basset Foundation, Amrita Singh of the Sommelier Association of India, Salvatore Castano (ASI Best Sommelier of Europe & Africa 2021) has steadily built his credentials all leading to his most recent accomplishment, the prestigious ASI Diploma Gold, held by only a few hundred professionals worldwide.

FEATURE ARTICLE

ASI: What originally inspired you to pursue a career as a sommelier?

Jai Singh (JS): I'm a hospitality school graduate, but until 2019 I was more involved in general food and beverage service. Service is the most beautiful part of our job—we get the chance to interact with people from different countries, cultures, and perspectives. It's a wonderful experience to hear people's stories.

During the pandemic in March 2020, when everything came to a halt, I bought some books and took a deep dive into the world of wine. That's when I started to see wine as a living being—something that evolves every day, with a rich history connected to the Etruscans, Greeks, and Romans.

After the pandemic, I decided to stay in the world of service, but this time focusing only on wine. I truly enjoy telling the story of a wine and its producer. One of the most beautiful aspects of being a sommelier is wine pairing. I always think of food and wine pairing as a kind of marriage—where neither partner should dominate. The ingredients in the food shouldn't overpower the wine, and the wine's structure and flavour profile shouldn't overwhelm the dish. They should complement each other, just as I aim for balance in my daily life with my wife.

ASI: Did you face any opposition from friends and family in India over your decision?

JS: My father is a retired bank manager. He's always had a very

“I truly enjoy telling the story of a wine and its producer. One of the most beautiful aspects of being a sommelier is wine pairing.”

Jai Singh: India's Top Sommm Achieves Gold standard

open mindset when it comes to education and career choices. He supported me throughout my studies, but he's not happy with my work schedule. Since I work in Italy and most hospitality jobs are seasonal, he would have preferred I took a more stable job with regular hours—especially one that allowed me to be home during festivals. Unfortunately, that's one of the downsides of this profession: we often work evenings, weekends, and it's nearly impossible to take holidays during public festivals.

ASI: How important has working in London and Italy been to your professional development?

JS: Working in London really boosted my confidence, both as a server and as a person, although I wasn't heavily involved with wine at that stage.

My wine journey truly began in Italy. At the end of 2016, I moved to my wife's hometown of Corato, near Bari in Puglia. It's a small town of about 50,000 people where agriculture plays a central role. They produce olive oil and wine. I didn't realise at the time that Corato is part of the Castel del

Monte DOCG. I arrived in October, just as the air was filled with the perfume of fermenting must. I took tours of local wineries to see how wine is produced.

In school, I had studied wine and served it throughout my career—but in Italy, I began to see the soul of wine. Here, it's not just a beverage; it's sacred. To deepen my understanding, I completed WSET Level 2 in 2019, which gave me a clearer path forward. I followed that with WSET Level 3 in 2020–2021. In April 2021, I was awarded a scholarship for the Italian Wine Scholar (IWS) programme, which gave me in-depth knowledge of Italian wines. I ended 2021 by passing both the Introductory and Certified Sommelier exams (Court of Master Sommeliers) on my first attempt.

ASI: Why was it important for India to create a sommelier association and join ASI?

JS: Over the past decade, the Indian wine industry has grown significantly, and there's now a pressing need for professional sommeliers to share wine knowledge across the country.

The creation of the Sommelier Association of India (SAI) in partnership with ASI will help set high service standards and improve the wine experience for Indian consumers. From the perspective of an Indian sommelier, many of us have followed ASI competitions for years. It was always disheartening not to see India represented in international competitions. That's why I feel so honoured and proud to be the first to represent India at the ASI Asia & Oceania and World competitions.

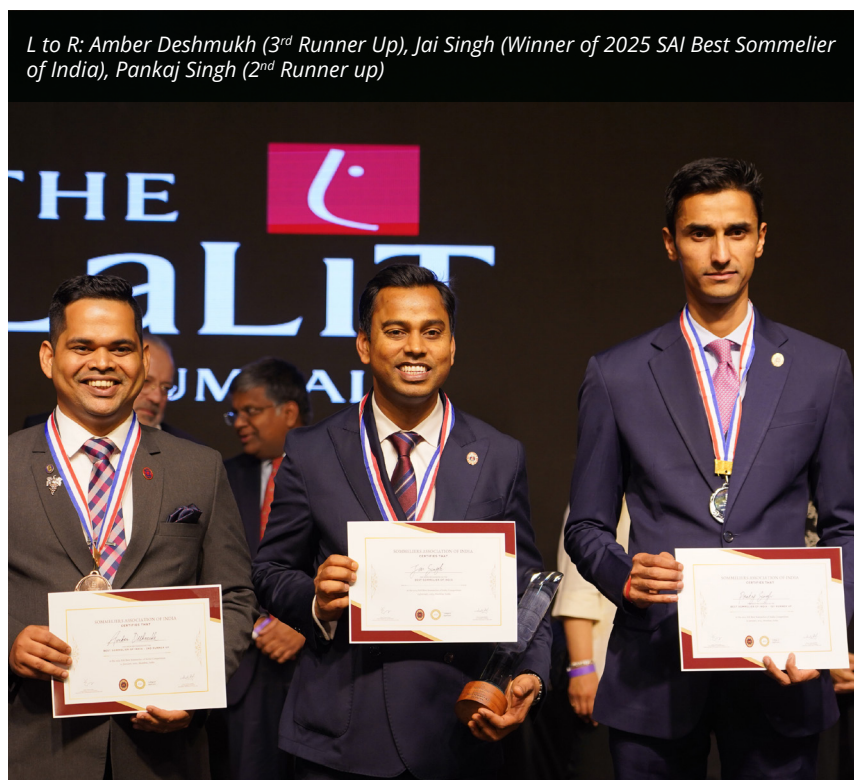
ASI: Has your life changed since winning the title of Best Sommelier of India?

JS: After winning, I received several offers to become a brand ambassador and trainer for sommelier education in India. But so far, I haven't accepted any of them—I've been focused on preparing for upcoming competitions. Right now, I work as a regular sommelier for Zuma Restaurants on Capri Island, Italy.

ASI: You most recently attained the ASI Sommelier Gold Diploma. What does this mean to you personally, and for India's place in the global wine community?

JS: The ASI Diploma Gold is a rare and prestigious certification—only a few hundred sommeliers worldwide hold it, and currently, there are only two of us in India who have achieved this title.

I pursued the ASI Diploma Gold to stay sharp for international competitions and to maintain the rhythm of my studies. Through my involvement with ASI, I want to demonstrate to the global sommelier community that Indian sommeliers have the capability and the passion to work internationally. Please don't hesitate to hire us—we'll exceed your expectations.



L to R: Amber Deshmukh (3rd Runner Up), Jai Singh (Winner of 2025 SAI Best Sommelier of India), Pankaj Singh (2nd Runner up)

Shirley Tan and Yi Ying Yong: attaining excellence at 67 Pall Mall Singapore

FEATURE ARTICLE

Shirley Tan and Yi Ying Yong: attaining excellence at 67 Pall Mall Singapore



Yi Ying Yong

“The exposure to the world’s finest wines, the unconditional support from my colleagues, and my own hunger to learn keep me going.”

– Yi Ying Yong

At 67 Pall Mall Singapore, where polished service meets one of the most formidable wine lists in Asia, excellence is more than expected—it’s a way of life. The club, known globally as a bastion of fine wine and fine service, recently celebrated a particularly proud milestone. Two of its own, **Shirly Tan** and **Yi Ying Yong**, have earned the prestigious ASI Diploma with ‘Gold’ distinction—an achievement reserved for the finest practitioners of the sommelier craft. In doing so, both Tan and Ying have joined an elite group of wine professionals worldwide whose knowledge, tasting skill, and service acumen are recognised as truly exemplary.

The ASI (Association de la Sommellerie Internationale) Diploma is among the most challenging and respected certifications in the global wine trade. Earning Gold requires more than just a theoretical understanding of grape varieties and regions—it demands a seamless integration of service elegance, blind tasting precision, and encyclopaedic knowledge of the world’s wines, spirits, and beyond. That two sommeliers from the same club—and from Singapore, no less—have achieved this simultaneously is a moment worth raising a glass to.

But beyond the accolade lies something more meaningful: a reflection of the culture cultivated at 67 Pall Mall. It’s a place where passion is nurtured, ambition is encouraged, and standards are set not just high, but higher. Tan and Ying’s success is a testament to their dedication—but also to the environment that helped them thrive.

ASI: Can you tell us about your journey into the world of wine? What inspired you to pursue a career as a sommelier?

Shirly Tan (ST): My love for wine began during university, while I was pursuing my bachelor’s degree in hospitality. To be honest, oenology class stood out because it was the only one that could keep me happily awake. Alongside a group of like-minded friends, we joined the Wine & Dine Club, exploring bars and restaurants and learning about food and wine pairings. That experience sparked my interest in discovering wine and other beverages.

“What keeps me going is my curiosity and deep love for wine and beverages. The industry is constantly evolving, with new trends, changing consumer preferences, and emerging wine regions.”

– Shirley Tan



Shirley Tan

From there, I quickly chose my career path and immersed myself in the hospitality industry. I started as an intern, working across a range of settings including bistros, bars, banquets, concerts, and emi-fine dining restaurants. These experiences confirmed that I wanted to pursue a career centered around wine. With a heart for service, becoming a sommelier felt like the perfect fit.

Yi Ying Yong (YY): After completing my master's degree, I took a short wine course in London and instantly fell in love with the subject. It felt like a natural extension of my studies, indirectly related but incredibly captivating. When I returned to Malaysia, that exposure to wine inspired me to pursue a career as a sommelier.

ASI: What role has formal education and certifications played in shaping your expertise, and what

motivates you to continue learning? Specifically, what does attaining the ASI Gold Diploma mean to you?

ST: My foundation in wine education began with the oenology class at university, which gave me the knowledge to pursue WSET Level 2. During my career as a sommelier, I was encouraged to take the Court of Master Sommeliers courses. I achieved the Introductory and Certified levels in 2018, followed by the Advanced Certificate in 2022. Out of personal interest in Italian wine, I also became an Italian Wine Ambassador.

In addition, my experience working in a whiskey bar and in various establishments, ranging from casual and fine dining Italian restaurants to a Teochew restaurant, oyster and steak house, and wine club, has helped shape my expertise and supported my journey through these certifications.





“I’ve met many inspiring people throughout my wine journey who have shaped me into who I am today.”

- Yi Ying Yong

FEATURE ARTICLE

Shirley Tan and Yi Ying Yong: attaining excellence at 67 Pall Mall Singapore

What keeps me going is my curiosity and deep love for wine and beverages. The industry is constantly evolving, with new trends, changing consumer preferences, and emerging wine regions. I’m always learning so I can serve our guests better and stay current.

Achieving the ASI Gold Diploma was a very exciting milestone. As a sommelier, I’m not only passionate about wine, but I also enjoy discovering local cuisines and beverages such as water, beer, and spirits from different regions. The ASI exam requires broad knowledge, not just of wine, but also of food and wine pairing, lesser-known regions, viticulture, vinification, and more. I truly enjoyed the preparation process.

YY: Formal education has allowed me to study wine in a structured, systematic way. It helped me understand all the essential aspects of being a sommelier. I’ve been learning step by step, discovering something new every day.

To me, certifications are both a challenge and a reflection of different chapters in my career. They’re a way to acknowledge and validate the effort I’ve put in. I was very happy to recently obtain the ASI Gold Diploma. It felt like a reward for my hard work. That said, I didn’t manage to answer every question, so it’s also a reminder that there’s always room to grow. I continue to strive to be better.

ASI: 67 Pall Mall boasts a legendary status in the world of fine wine. Have there been any mentors there who have been pivotal in your career development?

ST: Absolutely. Roberto Duran, our wonderful former Head Sommelier at 67 Pall Mall Singapore, has been a tremendous influence on me. His expertise and knowledge are unmatched, and I’ve learned so much from him - not just about wine, but also about perseverance and dedication, especially in his pursuit of the Master Sommelier title.

Despite his demanding schedule, he always made time for each team member, offering guidance

and support for our exams and competitions. He is hardworking, passionate, kind, and thoroughly professional. I wouldn’t be who I am today without his mentorship.

YY: I’ve met many inspiring people throughout my wine journey who have shaped me into who I am today. I’m especially grateful to my first employer, Vintry Group in Malaysia. Their passion for wine was infectious and sparked a constant curiosity in me.

Since joining 67 Pall Mall three years ago, I’ve grown tremendously, not just as a sommelier but as a person. The environment here has helped me focus on my studies. The culture is incredibly supportive, and we push each other to improve. That positive atmosphere has made all the difference.

ASI: 67 Pall Mall has a discerning clientele. How do they challenge you to be better? What are the most rewarding aspects of serving them?

ST: Our members are incredibly knowledgeable and passionate about wine. Many are collectors

and seasoned travellers who enjoy sharing their experiences. This means I need to stay attuned to new wine trends, regions, and producers to keep up with their evolving interests.

They often compare their experiences at different Clubs, which motivates me to go the extra mile in offering exceptional service and insight. The most rewarding part is earning their trust and satisfaction, especially when they feel comfortable discussing wine from their unique perspectives.

YY: Many of our guests come in with a strong understanding of and passion for wine. It is incredibly rewarding when they recognise and appreciate the selections or recommendations I make. Seeing them enjoy the wine brings me real satisfaction.

That said, it does require a lot of reading and continuous learning about producers and wine regions to meet or even exceed their expectations. Their knowledge pushes me to be sharper and stay informed.

ASI: What keeps you passionate and motivated in your work, in a high-pressure, prestigious environment like 67 Pall Mall?

ST: Many of our members are well-informed and open-minded, which motivates me to become more professional and knowledgeable so I can serve them better. Internally, I'm also inspired by our talented team of sommeliers. I see huge potential in them to lead the future of 67 Pall Mall, and I want to create an environment where they can learn, grow, and showcase their strengths.

Singapore also has a mature and competitive dining scene. It reminds me to stay unique, innovative, and responsive as a sommelier. The dynamic environment keeps me driven every day.

YY: The exposure to the world's finest wines, the unconditional support from my colleagues, and my own hunger to learn keep me going. The fast-paced service environment has also helped sharpen my skills. It has made me calmer and more composed with each challenge.

“Singapore also has a mature and competitive dining scene. It reminds me to stay unique, innovative, and responsive as a sommelier. The dynamic environment keeps me driven every day.”

- Shirley Tan

FEATURE ARTICLE

Shirley Tan and Yi Ying Yong: attaining excellence at 67 Pall Mall Singapore



Make Me a Match

Sake: a quick guide to balancing, texture and taste



Pairing sake with food, like wine or beer, is about finding harmony between flavour, texture, and weight. Where wine can sometimes wrestle with certain foods, sake tends to dance with it, enhancing rather than overwhelming. While it is often associated with Japanese cuisine, a new generation of sommeliers around the globe are seeing sake as a versatile match to both traditional and contemporary dishes. When it comes to pairing sake, start by considering the core elements of taste: sweetness, sourness, bitterness, and saltiness. The most successful pairings balance these elements on the palate. Texture matters, too — rich, full-bodied sakes can mirror creamy dishes, while lighter, drier styles work best with delicate fare.

When the Dish is Salty

Salty foods, such as seafood, salt cured foods, even simple salty snacks like pretzels or edamame pair wonderfully with crisp, dry sake styles such as **Junmai Ginjo** or **Honjozo**, which cleanse the palate and draw out umami without adding weight. Think matching poached seafood and soy rich appetisers with a clean, dry sake refreshes the mouth and highlights savoury notes.

In the case of sashimi, look to sakes with soft aromatics and a touch of sweetness — such as a well-balanced Ginjo or Junmai style.

These will complement the subtle salinity and texture of fresh fish without overpowering their delicate flavours.

When the Dish is Acidic

Acidic dishes — often marinated or pickled — call for sake with a touch of natural sweetness and a silky texture to balance the bite. A **Junmai Daiginjo** with fruity notes and a smooth finish makes a fine match for dishes with a notable pickle element as is common in Japanese cuisine, salads, and increasing a wide variety of contemporary appetiser dishes. These sakes soften acidity while adding aromatic complexity, creating a pairing that is bright, lifted, and layered.

When the Dish is Fatty

Rich, fatty foods demand a sake that offers structure and contrast. For something like wagyu beef or pork belly, a **Tokubetsu Junmai** or aged **Koshu** sake — often with umami depth and dry finish — will stand up to the richness while cutting through the fat. Alternatively, if the dish is layered with a hearty sauce consider higher-alcohol or slightly fuller-bodied sakes which can mirror the texture of the dish, matching richness with richness for a luxurious pairing experience.

When the Dish is Sweet

Pairing sake with dessert requires careful balance. Opt for sakes that are aromatic but moderately sweet, such as a **Nigori** (cloudy sake) with gentle sweetness, or a **Junmai Ginjo** with fruit-forward notes. These are ideal with desserts that aren't overly sugary.

When the Dish is Bitter

Bitter dishes, like those featuring dark greens, goya, can work well with earthy, umami-rich sakes — think traditional **Junmai** styles or aged sakes with a mellow, rounded profile. These types soften bitterness and often reveal subtle sweetness in the food.

The key here is finding a sake that doesn't compete but complements — earthy enough to handle bitterness, yet structured enough to cleanse the palate.

“While it is often associated with Japanese cuisine, a new generation of sommeliers around the globe are seeing sake as a versatile match to both traditional and contemporary dishes.”



Member Association Spotlight



MEMBER ASSOCIATION SPOTLIGHT

How Malaysia is Becoming a New Epicentre of Sommellerie in Asia

How Malaysia is Becoming a New Epicentre of Sommellerie in Asia

Fifteen years ago, the word “sommelier” had little traction in Malaysia’s food and beverage world. Wine culture was fledgling, and formal beverage service was something reserved for fine hotels or viewed as a European affectation. But in 2009, a group of passionate hospitality professionals believed something different was possible. Out of that belief, the Sommelier Association of Malaysia (SOMLAY) was born.



Justin Ho Li and Britt Ng represented Malaysia at the 2018 ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Oceania

“We saw the need for a formal platform dedicated to the sommelier profession,” says **Ronald Binati**, current president of SOMLAY. “Before our founding, the role of a sommelier was largely unknown in Malaysia’s F&B (food and beverage) scene. This lack of recognition posed a significant challenge from the start.”

Those early hurdles—lack of awareness, few formal training programmes, and limited support—only fuelled SOMLAY’s determination. **The association worked tirelessly to advocate for the value sommeliers bring to the dining experience, slowly shifting the perception of wine service from luxury to craft.**

“We aspire to become a driving force in elevating wine and beverage service across Southeast Asia.”

A key milestone in SOMLAY’s growth came when it joined the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI), the global body that connects sommeliers across continents. **“This affiliation has been transformative,” Binati says. “It connects us to a global**

network and sets a benchmark for excellence. It’s elevated the credibility of our sommeliers and opened doors to training, competitions, and international opportunities.”

Indeed, SOMLAY hasn’t just joined the international stage—it has begun hosting it. In 2022, the association took a bold leap and hosted the inaugural ASI Asia-Pacific Bootcamp. “It was a significant challenge for a relatively young association,” Binati admits. “But with the invaluable support of ASI—especially from **Saiko Tamura-Soga** and her colleagues—we delivered an impactful event.” **The Bootcamp drew young professionals from across the region and sparked a groundswell of enthusiasm at home. “It deepened knowledge, but more importantly, it inspired pride and ambition in our industry.”**

Next up: the ASI Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific 2025, hosted for the first time ever in Malaysia. For Binati, this isn’t just a competition—it’s a platform. “We want to showcase Malaysia’s growing sommelier community and provide a world-class stage for the region’s most talented sommeliers. Our goal is to spotlight Malaysia as a vibrant and emerging destination for wine culture and hospitality excellence.”



“With grace, tenacity, and a growing roster of world-class professionals, Malaysia isn’t just learning the language of wine in Asia—it’s helping to rewrite the script.”

Binati is also quick to highlight the talent now emerging from Malaysia’s cellars. **Justin Ho Li Vern** was the country’s first to break into the top three at an ASI continental competition. In 2023, **Tan Chuan Ann** made it to the semifinals of the ASI Best Sommelier of the World in Paris. Most recently, **Yi Ying Yong** earned Malaysia’s first ASI Gold Diploma and will compete in the upcoming Asia-Pacific contest. **“Every achievement counts for a small association like ours,”** says Binati. **“Through ASI activities, they’ve been able to network, share skills, and learn directly from the best in the world.”**

He credits ASI’s educational tools—like the ASI Guidelines and ASI Bootcamp—for helping Malaysian sommeliers understand the nuances of international competition and service. **“The ASI Bootcamp is the most effective,”** he says. **“It bridges the gap dominated by wine-producing countries and brings the global stage closer to our region.”**

Long-term, Binati envisions SOMLAY becoming more than a national voice. **“We aspire to become a driving force in elevating wine and beverage service across Southeast Asia,”** he says. **“With Malaysia’s growing culinary scene—Michelin-**

starred restaurants and entries on Asia’s 50 Best—we’re committed to nurturing talent and building a strong, supportive sommelier community.”

SOMLAY’s rise is more than a story of professional growth—it’s a story of cultural transformation. With grace, tenacity, and a growing roster of world-class professionals, Malaysia isn’t just learning the language of wine in Asia—it’s helping to rewrite the script.

Looking ahead, SOMLAY’s ambition isn’t limited to medals and diplomas. It wants to set the pace for Southeast Asia—nurturing a culture of professional wine service, elevating restaurant standards, and ensuring Malaysia continues to feature on global food and wine maps. **“With more Michelin stars gracing Malaysian kitchens and an international spotlight now firmly fixed on its sommeliers, the country seems poised to redefine what wine culture can look like in this part of the world.”**

One gets the sense that SOMLAY’s story is only just beginning. And if the past is any indication, the future of Malaysian sommelierie will be marked by grace, ambition, and a distinctive sense of hospitality all its own.



ANNOUNCING ASI & Gérard Basset Award 2026

This ASI Award was created in 2019, initially to honour Gérard Basset, and continues to recognise individuals who, like Gérard, have played an important role in promoting and developing the art of sommellerie around the world, taking into account everything they have achieved during their career. And, like Gérard, they must have demonstrated curiosity, tenacity, pugnacity, determination, kindness, diplomacy, humility, modesty, professionalism, a talent for mentoring young people, charisma, talent, a sense of humanity and a deep enthusiasm for life.

Gerard Basset
was awarded the prize
posthumously in 2019.

Serge Dubs
was awarded the prize
in 2021.

The winner of the
2023 ASI & Gérard
Basset Prize was
Giuseppe Vaccarini.



Nina Basset, Giuseppe Vaccarini, Serge Dubs and Romané Basset

Gerard Family Best Somm of World



Nina Basset




Criteria

- Be an internationally recognised figure who helps sommeliers to develop and promote their profession worldwide.
- Have provided long and loyal service to the wine industry by supporting sommeliers, winemakers and the hotel and restaurant industry.
- Have made an impact through their work and expertise for and/or within the sommelier profession.
- Be a great ambassador for wine, wine service and the hotel and restaurant industry, through service, wine production, education or/and journalism.
- Be a mentor and an example of professionalism in his/her own career who inspires others.
- Embrace change, diversity and inclusion.

Protocol

- The election of the winner of the ASI & Gérard Basset Award is open to all presidents of national associations that are members of the ASI.
- The Award jury composed of Nina Basset, William Wouters, Michèle Chantôme, Tim Vollerslev, Serge Dubs, Giuseppe Vaccarini and the current ASI World's Best Sommelier (Raimonds Tomsons) proposes a list of 14 names.
- The board of each national association will select one or two personalities (1 or 2 max) out of the list of 14 nominees proposed by the Award jury.
- That selection will take place before the end of November of the previous year for votes to be received on January 31st at the latest by the ASI & Gerard Basset Award Jury.
- An international jury (journalists, writers, wine makers), independent from ASI, will then vote for the best one out of the final nominees
- The name of the 2026 ASI & Gerard Basset Award will be announced worldwide on March 7th via press and social media.
- A prizegiving ceremony will be organised on the occasion of each ASI World's Best Sommelier Contest to physically present the Prize to the winner in the presence of the jury and representatives of the national associations.
- The trophy is an original bronze work created by Simon Boswell, a British artist proposed by Nina and Romané Basset and approved by the ASI Board.

A close-up profile of a woman with her eyes closed, smelling a glass of red wine. The glass is tilted, and the wine is visible. The background is softly blurred, showing a bottle of wine.

Uncorking the World of Wine for the Visually Impaired

In the heart of Brazil's capital, Brasília, a quiet but powerful revolution is underway—one led not by global headlines or sweeping legislation, but by the clinking of glasses and the bold aroma of Cabernet in the air.

The *Associação Brasileira de Sommeliers do Distrito Federal* (ABS-DF), the Brasília branch of Brazil's national sommelier association and an affiliate of ASI (Association de la Sommellerie Internationale), has just made history by offering its first Level I wine course designed specifically for the visually impaired. More than a milestone, it marks a sincere and progressive step toward inclusive education in the world of wine—one that sees with the nose, tastes with the ears, and learns with the fingertips.

At the centre of this initiative is Sérgio Pires, ABS-DF President and educator with more than 30 years of teaching experience. Like many breakthroughs, this one began with a moment of discomfort. Years ago, when faced with a visually impaired student in a standard wine class, Pires realised just how inaccessible traditional wine education could be—reliant as it was on visual aids, printed handouts, and slides. "I felt I was failing him," he admits. That initial discomfort evolved into determination. When another blind student signed up, he knew it was time to act.

In 2018, Pires reached out to the *Associação Brasileira de Deficientes Visuais* (ABDV) and held an experimental session for a group of blind participants. Supported by local wine importer Del Maipo Imports, award-winning chef Leninha Camargo, public relations expert Lu Alves, and a team of tireless volunteers, that class laid the groundwork for what has become the *Inclusive Wine Project*.

The newly launched course unfolded over five classes, each introducing participants to three different wines. The curriculum followed standard Level I training but required inventive adaptations. Visual analysis—the colour and clarity that typically mark a wine's first impression—was understandably omitted. Instead, the students dove deep into olfactory and gustatory realms, guided by multisensory cues and audio enhancements. Printed materials came in Braille, enlarged print, and digital formats accessible by screen readers. A specialist in image description was brought in to train instructors on how to 'paint' pictures with words.

Tactile and auditory engagement became key components. Students were introduced to a wine with a Braille label—Petit Mayne Pinot Noir from France—and local winery

Vinícola Marchese also stepped up, providing wines that helped translate theory into pleasure.

The project culminated on 5 June with a celebratory final class. True to the spirit of inclusivity, the event featured a performance by Nó Cego ("Blind Knot"), a samba group composed entirely of visually impaired musicians. The rhythm of samba and the bouquet of wine filled the room in harmonious celebration of what true accessibility can feel like.

ABS-DF isn't stopping with vision loss. The Inclusive Wine Project is structured in three phases:

- **Visual Impairment:** Prioritising tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and auditory experiences, along with accessible teaching materials.
- **Hearing Impairment:** Focusing on visual aids, clear written language, and content in Libras (Brazilian Sign Language).

- **Mobility Challenges:** Ensuring venues and sessions offer comfort, autonomy, and respect for physical diversity.

The long-term ambition? To open doors in the wine industry to all. It's a dream grounded in precedent. Take Núbia de Freitas and Thonny Moraes, a visually impaired couple from Pará. After completing a regular ABS course, they launched their own wine business, *Avintura Vinhos Finos*. Proof that with the right support, passion and talent can uncork new ventures—even in unexpected places.

Wine, after all, is not just about sight—it's about story, sensation, memory. And thanks to ABS-DF's trailblazing efforts, that story is now being told in a language more people can finally understand.

Cheers to that.



Member News

Vinexpo Asia 2025: A Sommelier's Lens on the Future of Wine and Hospitality

Held from 27–29 May at Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, Vinexpo Asia 2025 placed the evolving role of sommeliers at the forefront through its expanded Vinexpo Academy programme. With over 30 masterclasses, panel discussions, and tastings, the Academy served as a vital resource for professionals navigating Asia's fast-changing wine and spirit market.

Sommellerie took centre stage in sessions such as *Reinventing Pairings: Wine & Asian Gastronomy*, where **Richard Hemming MW** joined **Janice Chi** (Master Sake Sommelier) and **Aaron Jacobson** (Sommelier, Restaurant Zén) to explore new pairing paradigms influenced by Asia's rich culinary diversity. *Austria Meets Asia*, led by **Stephen Wong MW**, and *Discover Exceptional Underestimated French Terroirs* with **Andreas Larsson** (Best Sommelier of the World 2007), offered participants regionally focused tasting experiences.

Reeze Choi, Hong Kong's first finalist at the ASI Best Sommelier of the World contest, was joined by **Andreas Larsson** as co-host of the perennially popular *ASI x Vinexposium Blind Tasting Challenge*, underlining the Academy's commitment to elevating sommelierie. This was the second time Choi had hosted the event.

ASI also hosted a second masterclass titled ASI Sommelier Battle, which pitted **Mason Ng** (ASI Best Sommelier of Asia Oceania 2022) against **Tran Tram** (Best Sommelier of Vietnam 2024). The goal to compare and contrast wines made from the same varietal highlighting climatic differences.

With discussions on Chinese wine regions and the growing prominence of wines from Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam, Vinexpo Asia 2025 captured the rapid diversification of the global trade. For sommeliers, the Academy offered essential tools to remain agile, informed, and ahead of the curve in a transforming industry.

A Toast to Excellence: The Mexican Sommelier Association Marks International Sommelier Day with Style

On 3 June, the Mexican Sommelier Association (*Asociación de Sommeliers Mexicanos A.C.*, ASM) raised a collective glass to the profession we all hold dear. Hosted in the elegant surrounds of Hotel Camino Real in Mexico City, this year's celebration of International Sommelier Day was more than a festive toast—it was a statement of growth, unity, and ambition.

Each year, this global occasion honours the founding of the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI), but in Mexico, it has grown into a full-day symposium for the country's sommelier community and wine trade. The ASM curated a dynamic programme that seamlessly blended academic rigour with heartfelt celebration. From the outset, the tone was one of progress and purpose.

Four top-tier masterclasses anchored the day. **Salomón Abedrop**, President of the Mexican Wine Council, and **Manuel Negrete** of Wine Bar by Concours Mondial de Bruxelles opened the series, setting the stage for knowledge sharing. **Benjamín Hernández** of Amorim Cork explored sustainability and global cork trends, while **Eduardo Murillo** of TN Coopers led a deep dive into the vital role barrels play in shaping wine character. The afternoon turned

towards the glass with a spirited tasting of DOP Jumilla wines—presented with infectious passion by sommeliers **Georgina Estrada** and **Sandra Fernández**.

Perhaps the most poignant moment came during the awards ceremony, when Georgina Estrada was officially appointed President of ASM—the first woman to hold the position. Her appointment is more than a milestone; it signals a new era of inclusivity and international outlook for Mexican sommellerie.

From start to finish, this was an event that celebrated not only wine, but the people behind it—the sommeliers whose passion, knowledge, and professionalism continue to elevate Mexico on the global wine stage.

Alicia Towns Franken Boosts Diversity Through Wine Unify

On 3 June, Food & Wine recognised **Alicia Towns Franken** as a “Game Changer” for her leadership as Executive Director of Wine Unify. Since co-founding the organisation in 2020, she has overseen the distribution of over US \$350,000 in grants to 165 wine professionals of colour across 37 U.S. states.

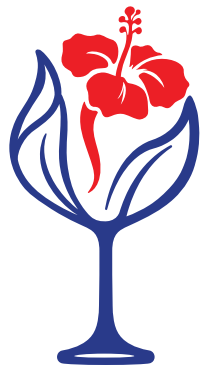
Wine Unify’s three-tiered mission—Welcome, Elevate, and Amplify—supports newcomers through education, nurtures emerging talent, and spotlights industry leaders, firmly challenging long-standing exclusionary norms.



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