

# ASI MAGAZINE

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## *In Pursuit of* **KNOWLEDGE**



**THE ASI GOLD STANDARD**  
Léonard Lievin



**GUEST EDITORS**  
Cokie Ponikvar, David Hsaio, Paolo Saccone MS



# IN PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

WITH COKIE PONIKVAR



# THE ASI GOLD STANDARD

WITH LÉONARD LIEVIN



## A Sommelier's Insight

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# Welcome!



*William Wouters,  
President ASI*

Welcome to this new edition of ASI Magazine. Each issue I am reminded of the importance education and certification plays in our professional lives. I think of hospitality as our soul, and education as our heart. Without it, we cannot live as a profession.

Trends change, dining rooms evolve, and new generations of guests arrive with new expectations, yet one constant remains. A sommelier who is well trained, curious and confident will always elevate the experience at the table. Education is not only about passing exams. It is the daily practice of learning to read a room, of tasting with discipline, of listening to producers, and of translating culture into hospitality.



**“Step by step is not a slogan. It is a promise that no one is asked to leap without a bridge.”**

is consistent, fair and transferable across venues and borders.

I am pleased to share another milestone. In January we will launch a preparatory level that complements Certification 1, Certification 2 and the ASI Diploma.

This new step recognises a simple truth. Confidence grows when knowledge is built in measured stages. Many colleagues work in regions where access to formal training has been limited. Some are moving between languages. Others are returning to study after years on the floor. A clear ramp to success will help more people start the journey, understand expectations

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

William Wouters, President ASI

and develop sound habits from the first day. The preparatory level will focus on the foundations that support everything that follows. Service etiquette. Core tasting technique. The essential grapes and regions. The very universal language, vocabulary of hospitality that makes guests feel welcome before they have taken a sip.

**This pathway matters most in emerging countries, where talent is rich and resources can be scarce.**

By setting progressive goals and offering learning materials that are practical and accessible, we honour our mission to serve the global profession, not only its most visible centres. Step by step is not a slogan. It is a promise that no one is asked to leap without a bridge. Certification 1 validates essential competence. Certification 2 recognises enhanced knowledge and service craft. The ASI Diploma remains our pinnacle; a mark of mastery earned through discipline and humility. Together with the preparatory level, these stages form a coherent ladder that any dedicated professional can climb.

I want to pause on the word community. Exams provide standards. Community provides

strength. The ASI Bootcamp is one of the best expressions of both. **Bootcamp has given hundreds of sommeliers the chance to train with leading educators, to taste across categories, and to practise under pressure in a supportive environment.** Participants arrive as individuals and leave with a network that lasts for years. They gain speed and precision, but also resilience. They learn how to reset after a mistake, how to communicate with grace, and how to make the guest the centre of the story. I have watched quiet participants find their voice, and experienced sommeliers rediscover curiosity. That spirit is the true success of Bootcamp. It turns ambition into purpose and competition into camaraderie.

None of this work happens by accident. My thanks to the members of the Education & Exams Committee for their dedication, to our instructors who give their time so generously, and to the many volunteers who coordinate venues, logistics and translations. Thank you to the producers who open their cellars and share their knowledge. Thank you to the restaurants that host training sessions and welcome young sommeliers into professional service. When an organisation sets

a standard, it must also build the road that allows people to reach it. Your efforts build that road.

To our readers I offer three invitations. First, keep learning. Taste outside your comfort zone. Read beyond your favourite region, beyond your favourite beverage. Ask a colleague from another country for their insights. With that in mind, we are proud to announce the development of an ASI study group. **This online community serves to strengthen our bonds, allows to push out beyond our traditional borders and connects a community of sommeliers from across the world.** We encourage to learn from each other and to form a positive network of like-minded individuals. Remember personal strength and conviction is enhanced by the support of friends and colleagues.

I encourage you to share what you know not only on our new platform but also within your personal community. Be a mentor to a junior team member. Offer a tasting to your kitchen, or bar, staff. The act of teaching will sharpen your own craft.

Finally, remember to bring your whole self to the guest. Our credentials matter because they help us serve with confidence. Service remains an act of generosity. A warm greeting, a thoughtful question, a wine placed on the table at the right moment. These are the gestures that turn knowledge into hospitality.

**To quote famed restaurateur Danny Meyer, "business, like life, is all about how you make people feel. It's that simple, and it's that hard."**

**"When an organisation sets a standard, it must also build the road that allows people to reach it. Your efforts build that road."**

# In My Glass



**Mark DeWolf**  
 Mark DeWolf, Content Manager ASI  
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## Education Through Exploration

There is a moment in every service when a guest asks for a recommendation that makes you pause. Not because you do not have an answer, but because you realise there might be a better one—or at least a more distinctive offering—if you stretch yourself a little further. That small jolt is the beginning of education. It does not happen only in classrooms. It happens at the table, and in the quiet space between what you already know and what you are about to discover.

I have always believed that a sommelier's craft is a conversation, and conversations get interesting when you allow new voices in. Lately, my glass has included more than wine, and the wines increasingly reflect new varietals and new places that go well beyond the tried and true. Sometimes

learning is simply a willingness to explore, pushing aside the known for the unknown. Whether it's choosing an Assyrtiko from Santorini instead of a Chablis from France, or a Tuscan Ciliegiole or Sicilian Frappato in place of Gamay. On a recent trip to Tuscany, I happened on a bottle of Sequerciani Ciliegiole. Inspired to try something new and interesting, I was pleased the wine delivered on all its cherry fruit promise (Ciliegiole being derived from ciliegia, meaning cherry), but also had a savoury complexity on the nose that added depth and interest.

Over the past few years, sake has risen from obscurity to a core part of our common sommelier vernacular. Education around Japan's national beverage has grown significantly, thanks in no small part to the tireless work

**“It happens at the table, and in the quiet space between what you already know and what you are about to discover.”**



IN MY GLASS

Mark DeWolf: Editor, Content Manager

## “These innovations are a reminder that the sommelier’s educational path never truly ends.”

of the Japan Sake & Shochu Makers Association in their export markets. Through exploration, even producers have expanded their own understanding of the category. Brewers have broadened sake’s flavour profile, often looking to the past to shape a more dynamic future. From revived *kimoto* and *yamahai* starter methods to the use of heirloom rice varieties—an approach that reinforces a growing sense of terroir in sake—the category has never been more diverse. Add in sparkling styles such as Masumi’s Origami Sparkling (introduced to me by Chef Darren MacLean), including Pet Nat-inspired versions, and what was once a couple of pages in a textbook now reads like a full course.

There has been a global return to artisanal beverages. Traditional ciders from northern latitudes, Italian amari, Mexican mezcal, and Korean soju are now amongst the tools in the modern sommelier’s kit.



Even classic categories such as dry gin deserve another look. The structure and familiarity that once defined the London Dry style have given way to a new generation of regional interpretation; many of which are far more nuanced than their predecessors. One recent example that stopped me mid-pour was Smeaton’s Bristol Method Dry Gin. This is not just another revival story. Distilled in individual botanical runs and blended post-distillation, it offers remarkable freshness and aromatic complexity, showing just how contemporary a traditional category can become when guided by thoughtful process and precision.

Whisky, too, is no longer bound by geography or expectation. While heritage producers still set many of the benchmarks, small-batch makers in unexpected places are redefining what whisky can be. Two Brewers Canadian Whisky, crafted in the sparsely populated Yukon by former brewers turned

distillers, is doing just that. With a deft balance of richness, grain character and subtle oak, it moves confidently beyond the shadow of its traditional counterparts, proving that Canadian whisky can be just as nuanced and contemplative as any Scotch or Bourbon.

These innovations are a reminder that, whether through formal training or informal exploration, the sommelier’s educational path never truly ends. What’s in our glass should continue to evolve and reflect the diversity of what the world is drinking today.

*Cheers*

# Guest Editors

COKIE PONIKVAR, DAVID HSIAO, PAOLO SACCONI MS

A DISCUSSION WITH...



Cokie Ponikvar

## In Pursuit of Knowledge

With Cokie Ponikvar

A former floor sommelier at the Four Seasons in Toronto, 24-year-old **Cokie Ponikvar** is now pursuing both Master of Wine and Master Sommelier. Along the way she has built a vast global audience with *Cokie's World of Wine* which has close to a half million followers, earned the IWSC Emerging Talent in Wine Communications award, and become a standard bearer for joyful, rigorous wine education. In this conversation, Cokie shares what drives her study habit, why excitement is not the enemy of professionalism, and how to make learning feel like discovery.

When asked about the moment wine, sommellerie became a career aspiration she says, "I was super academic growing up," she begins, laughing at the memory of a teenager who did extra reading for fun. "I did not think I would end up in hospitality. What drew me to wine was the academic side of it, and honestly that is still what keeps me engaged now."

Discovery also came with travel. During a roaming year in grade twelve, she watched the movie *Somm* and felt something unlock. "I remember thinking, this is the coolest thing I have ever seen. People pushing themselves at a very high level, and yet what they are doing is relevant to anyone who enjoys a glass of wine." **One line in particular stayed with her. "Brian McClintic says that some people**

**hear about this and say good for you, and others say I want to do that. Those words spoke to my soul."**

If the initial pull was cerebral, the front of house soon added a second current. "There is nothing like seeing a guest's eyes light up when you have taken their experience to another level," she says. "That feeling is still one of my favourites."

Nothing from her childhood prepared her for a career in wine. At home, wine talk was casual rather than formal. "My parents drank wine, but it was not a big topic of conversation. My dad tried to teach me how to swirl and to breathe in while sipping, which he didn't quite get right, but it was sweet," she says. **"I bought *Wine Folly* and started teaching myself. From the start I did not attend**

**"What drew me to wine was the academic side of it, and honestly that is still what keeps me engaged now."**

many classes. I figured things out and my parents enjoyed learning alongside me."

Mentors and formal steps followed. "My first serious step was working at a wine bar under a Master Sommelier in Toronto. That was huge because I had someone that I trusted to check my thinking," she says. "I started WSET just before the pandemic, then did Levels 2, 3 and the Diploma after. I would fly to Boston for Diploma exams because I needed reliability and momentum. I was very keen to finish quickly so I could move on to Master of Wine and Master Sommelier."

She speaks about the energy that fuels the journey. "It is definitely personal fire. I love the pursuit of knowledge at the highest level," she says. "I looked at the numbers and if you add up all the hoops, factoring all the various pass rates of each exam, not just the hardest ones, and according to ChatGPT, the odds of becoming a Master of Wine are about 0.4 per cent. You are more likely to get into Harvard or become an astronaut for NASA. That is exactly why I am drawn to it. If it were easier, I would not be as excited."

Blind tasting is where many candidates stall. For Cokie, the challenge was compounded by availability. "In Canada, many exam wines simply do not exist on the shelf. I remember an MW seminar where a wine from Navarra was on the grid and it was not available anywhere in Ontario," she recalls. "I realised I needed more exposure, so I moved to London for six months and joined serious tasting groups to level up."

Back home she engineered a system that turned errors into assets. "I built a blind tasting library in my fridge, sometimes up to eight hundred small bottles," she says with a grin. "If I miscalled a wine, I would put it beside the wine I thought it was and study the differences. I would write notes about the gap between them. I do not make the same mistake twice when I learn that way."

She is quick to add that solitary practice is not about isolation. It is about maximising learning. "Traditional groups are great, but you can lose the learning moment in the talk and the guess. I wanted a process that captured the lesson every time," she says. "For me, that meant designing a practice that fits how my brain works."

"I take the wine I got wrong and put it next to the wine I thought it was. Then I study the difference, and I do not make the same mistake twice."

**"My first serious step was working at a wine bar under a Master Sommelier in Toronto. That was huge because I had someone that I trusted to check my thinking."**





There is also the cellar. "Getting your hands dirty gives you a deeper kind of knowledge," she says.

"Sommelier programmes do not always go very far into viticulture or winemaking. Working harvests answered that gap for me."

The work matters as much as the theory. "I love the sweat and the must on your fingers and the long days. You earn the right to understand," she says. "You also earn the trust of winemakers whose time is precious. I have done harvests in Niagara, the Finger Lakes, Oregon and Napa. This year I finally did a harvest in France. That was a big dream."

Every achievement exacts a cost. "You have to sacrifice," Cokie says simply. "I barely make it to Thanksgiving with my family because I am studying. Friends have seen relationships end because of the demands. Being young and without dependents helps, but it is still all consuming. That is the reality if you want to succeed at this level." She smiles ruefully. "The upside is, when I do show up to family events, I bring good bottles and can walk

everyone through what is in their glass. That seems to help."

Her digital presence began without strategy. "It was never a business plan," she says. "I had just learned that Pinot Noir is a grape, and I thought that was the coolest thing. I wanted to tell someone. I started an Instagram account for my parents and their friends and slowly I reached nine hundred followers. Then a few videos went viral. And the rest is history."

What came next was the realisation that instinct can be a guide. "The best things I have done started because they felt right in the moment," she says. "I do not feel like I have ever worked a day. I travel, I share wine, and I learn with people. It feels like I have hacked the system."

Communicating to a broad spectrum is now her daily craft. "At first it was easy, because I was learning alongside my audience," she says. "Now I need to speak to beginners and to great winemakers, often in the same post. That balance is hard."

The key, she believes, is not dumbing down, but tuning up the tone. "People are not dumb. Young people are smart. We do not need to make the content empty," she says. "We need to adjust tone and approach. We need clarity and excitement. Excitement is not unprofessional. It is necessary."

She recalls studying language at university. "I wrote about the language of wine, all those words like brioche and cassis that can turn people away," she says. "We still need precise words. We also need energy. I try to use my whole body when I explain why something is cool. If you find it thrilling, people will feel it too."

As far as the role of the sommelier, Cokie is emphatic. "Sommeliers are communicators at heart," she says. "If you cannot communicate with passion and a smile and relatability, you miss the point. Without that, you contribute to the pile of rubbish that turns people away from wine."

"Wine is just grape juice. Wonderful grape juice, but still grape juice. There is nothing superior about it, so why would we speak as if there is."

She also refuses the idea that gravitas requires stiffness. "I sometimes write emails that say you guys," she says. "I do not think that is unprofessional in this space. It is refreshing. It signals that people can relax and ask questions."

As for what happens if all the studying pays off in spectacular fashion, and she becomes both an MW and MS, she says, "right now, passing the exams takes all the focus," she says.

"I am giving everything to them. I am not sure what the future holds if I can attain these titles. I used to worry that something was wrong with me because I did not have a five or ten-year plan, but I have learned that it is fine not to know, and I will discover who I am on the other side. I am only twenty-four years old. There is time."

When asked whether she would ever step into a sommelier competition, Cokie says "Maybe" after a beat. "It terrifies me. Exams are controlled. Competitions add an audience and direct comparison, and I have not competed at a high level. But I like challenges, so we will see."

She laughs when after her future title could reads like a comic book

cover. "MS, MW, ASI Best Sommelier of the World." Cokie shakes her head. "That sounds like world domination," she says. "I am not sure I could handle that."

With power comes influence, but it also comes with feedback. "As your audience grows, so does the noise," she says. "I am very lucky that most feedback is positive. Still, you can hear the critical voices in your head. That can make you timid. You want to curl up and stay comfortable. The work is to keep sharing and to remember why you started."

Why did she begin this journey? "Because learning is fun," she says. "Because a grape can carry a place inside it, and that is magic worth sharing."

**To summarise her approach for other learners and educators, Cokie offers the following five principles:**

### **Design your practice around how you actually learn**

"I made a blind tasting library and a compare and contrast routine because that is how I retain knowledge. Build a process that fits your brain and your schedule."

### **Turn errors into lessons immediately**

"If you miss a call, pair the wrong wine with the wine you thought it was and write why they differ. You will not repeat the error."

### **Get your hands dirty**

"Work a harvest if you can. You will understand more in one intense month than you can from a year of reading."

### **Protect momentum**

"Seek reliability in your programme and logistics. If you need to fly somewhere to sit an exam on time, do it."

### **Lead with excitement and clarity**

"People are smart. Speak precisely, then bring the energy that made you fall in love with the subject."



[www.cokie.ca](http://www.cokie.ca)



David Hsiao

## The Expanding Palate:

Why Spirits Education Belongs at the Sommelier's Table

With David Hsiao

**"They can become meaningful extensions of the bar, especially when it comes to digestives or signature cocktails."**

**David Hsiao** is a name that resonates throughout East Asia's beverage circles—not only for his extensive work in the world of wine, but increasingly for his advocacy of spirits education. Based in Taipei, Hsiao wears many hats: he is a senior guest brand ambassador for Diageo, Pernod Ricard and Hua Yang International; a columnist for *Whisky Magazine Taiwan*; and an advisor to both New Zealand Trade & Enterprise and Business France. He is also the only sommelier in Taiwan to hold certifications from WSET in both wine and spirits, a Court of Master Sommeliers accreditation, and WSET nominated educator status. All of these alongside postgraduate degrees in biotechnology, biochemistry and international business.

Despite this impressive résumé, Hsiao's passion for spirits began with something simple: a glass of whisky served in a New Zealand restaurant during his university days. "My first sip of spirits was in the restaurant where I worked during my first year of university. The flavour intensity, complexity and smokiness of that Johnnie Walker Black Label was an eye-opener," he says. "It made me realise that, aside from a great wine list, a well-considered spirits selection is irreplaceable if a restaurant wants to leave a lasting impression."

That early exposure planted a seed. But it wasn't until Hsiao returned to Taiwan that his passion for spirits truly deepened. Taiwan's accessibility to a broad range of international spirits, especially whisky, provided him with the



ideal setting to learn. “The variety available here is incredible, and prices are much more friendly compared to other markets. I took every opportunity to attend tastings, join clubs, and explore masterclasses,” he says. **“Over time, I developed the belief that a superb wine list and an outstanding spirits programme are equally important in any restaurant.”**

## “The time has come for the spirits world to follow the wine world’s lead.”

That belief became a cornerstone of Hsiao’s professional journey, shaping how he consults for top restaurants in Taiwan and beyond. It has

also made him a vocal advocate for expanding the sommelier’s traditional wine-based role to include a more holistic approach to beverage education.

“Wine will always be central to what we do, but our scope should include anything liquid, apart from maybe soup,” he says with a smile.

**“A thoughtfully chosen spirit at the end of a meal can elevate the guest experience, while also generating additional revenue for the restaurant. It’s a win-win.”**

That revenue point is key, especially in today’s shifting drinks landscape. According to recent data from

IWSR, while total beverage alcohol volume has declined by two percent since 2019, spirits (excluding national spirits) and ready-to-drink categories are the only sectors showing consistent growth. Wine, on the other hand, has dropped by 21 per cent in the same period.

“The market is evolving rapidly,” Hsiao notes. “Agave-based spirits like Mezcal and Tequila continue to thrive. Irish whiskey exports have risen significantly, particularly in Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, shifts in China’s luxury market may actually benefit the on-trade sector, as ultra-premium spirits move out of gifting and auction contexts and back into venues where people enjoy them.”

For sommeliers, this shifting landscape presents an opportunity. “If a guest is looking for an agave-based spirit with a distinctive smoky profile, knowing to recommend a ‘Mezcal Artesanal’ or ‘Mezcal Ancestral’, both spirits made using wood-heated underground pits is invaluable. Spirits knowledge allows you to meet your guest’s expectations and, sometimes, surpass them.”

It also allows sommeliers to stand out in a crowded field. **“Knowledge in spirits and other beverages can differentiate you from your peers,”** he says. **“It’s not just about wine pairing anymore. Guests are**

curious. They want experiences. Sommeliers are ideally positioned to offer those experiences."

As craft distilling and hybrid spirit categories continue to rise, Hsiao believes the role of the sommelier is set to expand even further. "Today, gin is a good example," he explains. "Ten or twenty years ago, knowing five or six major gin brands was more than enough. But now, with the explosion of craft gins globally, we need to understand flavour profiles, botanicals, and production methods. This allows us to create bespoke gin and tonics that surprise and delight guests."

Eastern spirits are also gaining ground. "Baijiu, Shochu, Soju—these spirits have been traditionally consumed in their countries of origin, but now they're appearing on global menus. Their production methods are complex, involving solid-state fermentation and unique ingredients. Understanding them takes effort, but it opens up another world of pairing opportunities."

That broader knowledge does not mean sommeliers must also become bartenders; he clarifies. Rather, they can become meaningful extensions of the bar, especially when it comes to digestives or signature cocktails.

"We are the people closest to the guest. Recommending a cocktail base spirit, or a special digestif, with confidence, should become standard practice," he says. "It strengthens the value we bring to the guest experience and to the restaurant's bottom line."

As for how spirits education compares to wine education, Hsiao sees both parallels and gaps. "WSET's Award in Spirits is probably the most structured spirits education available today. It shares a theoretical framework and blind tasting methodology similar to wine programmes," he says. "However, service is often overlooked in spirits education, and this is where wine-focused certifications like ASI and CMS have an edge."

Spirits education also places more emphasis on distillation science and chemistry. "There's less regulation than in wine, and fewer origin-specific laws to memorise. But the technical understanding needed is significant. You need to be able to explain how a column still reaches and maintains dynamic equilibrium, for instance. That's not something most wine professionals have to master."

Despite these differences, Hsiao believes the time has come for the

spirits world to follow the wine world's lead in formal education. "It would be ideal to see spirits programmes that cover theory, tasting and service—including upselling techniques and pairing recommendations," he says. "ASI is in a unique position to lead this. Their reach is global, and they already include a significant spirits component in their certifications."

He points to Taiwan's own efforts as an example. "The Taiwan Sommelier Association recently formed an advisory group that includes national experts in wine, sake, spirits, hospitality and culinary arts. The goal is to offer more comprehensive training to our members. It's a model that could work elsewhere."

For those entering the profession, Hsiao offers both practical advice and philosophical guidance. "I usually recommend spending around 70 to 80 per cent of your study time on wine, and the rest on spirits and other beverages. That's roughly how I've approached it myself, although I may lean more towards spirits these days."

He also encourages young sommeliers to set study goals whether it is weekly, monthly and yearly, and he recommends to seek out spirits certifications from diverse institutions. "There are so many great programmes now, from WSET to the Council of Whisky Masters and Edinburgh Whisky Academy. Find the spirit category you're most passionate about and aim to become an expert."

As someone who found his own path through a single glass of whisky, Hsiao's journey serves as a reminder that inspiration can come from unexpected places. Borrowing a famous quote from King Edward VII, he says. "One not only drinks wine, one smells it, observes it, tastes it, sips it, and one talks about it. I would just add spirits to that sentence. *Sláinte Mhath.*"





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## A Journey in Sommellerie:

one glass, one guest,  
and one story at a time

With Paolo Saccone MS,  
ASI Diploma Gold

From the cobbled streets of Milan to the vibrant dining rooms of Sydney, **Paolo Saccone's** path to becoming a Master Sommelier and ASI Gold Diploma recipient is one defined by unwavering dedication, international excellence and a deep, human connection to wine. With a career that spans continents and Michelin-starred dining rooms, Saccone has not only earned some of the profession's highest accolades but has also quietly built a legacy of mentorship, authenticity and emotional intelligence in wine service.



Paolo Saccone MS

A DISCUSSION WITH...

Today, as the founder of *Vino by Paolo* and a leading figure within Australia's Lucas Restaurants collective, he continues to shape the future of hospitality: one glass, one guest, and one story at a time.

It's easy to focus on the accolades: Master Sommelier, ASI Gold Diploma, finalist in sommelier competitions, but speaking with Paolo Saccone, one quickly understands that while the titles are earned, they are not the reason for his success. **The Milan-born sommelier, now based in Sydney (Australia), has built a career not just on precision and knowledge, but on a deep, emotional connection to hospitality.** His story begins in the kitchen, surrounded by the scent of simmering tomatoes and fresh herbs, and has taken him to the world's most respected dining rooms.

**"While growing up and going to school, my family was working in hospitality. My mother was a chef, and my father worked within the same complex,"** Saccone recalls.

"When I was about thirteen or fourteen, while attending hospitality school in Milan, I started working nights as a pizzaiolo in the village where I grew up." Those early years were formative. The act of handling raw ingredients every day taught him not just how to cook, but how to taste, to smell, and to recognise flavour in a way that would quietly shape his future as a sommelier.

He initially assumed he would follow in his mother's footsteps and become a chef, but when his hospitality school required students to specialise Saccone surprised everyone, including himself, by choosing wine. "Everyone assumed I'd continue as a chef,

**"For me, it was about setting goals so high that it almost felt unreachable, something that would constantly challenge me to evolve."**

but something about wine intrigued me," he says. "My father used to bottle his own wines at home, and I'd often help him. I remember thinking I might have a small advantage, at least some familiarity. And I thought this path might open doors to travel and discovery."

**The leap was instinctive, and it turned out to be life-defining.**

There was, however, one moment that solidified everything. "It happened during my sommelier studies," he says. "The courses were led by Giuseppe Vaccarini, who had been crowned Best Sommelier of the World in 1978." Vaccarini's teaching style left a mark, but it was the tasting classes that resonated most. "Those sessions were magic for me. I could recognise fruits, herbs, citrus, and vegetal aromas quite naturally," Saccone recalls. It was a direct extension of his early kitchen life. One day, after a practical tasting, Vaccarini approached him. "You have a gift," he told me. "If you pursue this seriously, you could really thrive as a sommelier." The comment was simple, but it changed everything. "That conversation shaped the course of my life."

**"Those sessions were magic for me. I could recognise fruits, herbs, citrus, and vegetal aromas quite naturally."**

Following his studies, Saccone's career took him to Paris, and then on to London, where he spent several years immersed in some of the world's most competitive dining scenes. "It was intense, fast-paced, and full of opportunity," he reflects. Then came a change in climate, both literally and professionally.

"A few of my schoolmates and I began hearing more and more about Australia. Friends who had gone there spoke of its energy, sunshine, and a growing food and wine scene," he says. **What began as a short professional adventure soon became something more permanent.** "From the moment I arrived from London, the climate was a big change; the winters never felt harsh. Professionally, Australia offered incredible opportunities to grow. The industry here values passion, creativity, and individuality. Over time, Sydney began to feel like home to me.

His journey through many of the world's great dining cities has left Saccone with a global perspective, but when asked about mentorship, he speaks with a kind of reverence.

**"Without a doubt, Giuseppe Vaccarini has been my greatest mentor,"** he says. "He was the one who first saw something in me when I was just a student. His dedication to the profession, his generosity in sharing knowledge, and his constant work in inspiring the next generation. That left a deep impression."

Those values continue to shape Saccone's approach to hospitality and mentorship. For him, being a sommelier is not just about skill. "It's about passion, humility, and the desire to connect people to the stories behind every bottle."

In 2022, Paolo achieved the prestigious title of ASI Diploma Gold and more recently this year,



Sydney, Australia



Restaurant in Milan



A DISCUSSION WITH...

Cokie Ponikvar, David Hsiao and Paolo Saccone MS

Saccone achieved one another of the wine world's highest distinctions, the title of Master Sommelier. For most, this would be the culmination of a career. For Saccone, it was the beginning of another phase.

"I would say my motivation came from both personal and professional places," he explains.

"Of course, the titles open many doors in terms of career progression, but on a personal level, it was more than that. For me, it was about setting goals so high that it almost felt unreachable, something that would constantly challenge me to evolve. It became a kind of obsession, in the best possible way. That kind of goal constantly challenges you to evolve."

The pursuit, he says, became a kind of obsession, but in the best possible way. "Every time I felt confident in my preparation, I'd realise how much more there was to learn. That constant feeling of 'not enough yet' became fuel." His curiosity and commitment to excellence are ever-present. "There's always another wine to taste, another vineyard to visit,

another book to read, another perspective to explore."

Saccone is quick to acknowledge the role structured education has played in his own development, but he's just as clear-eyed about where the real learning takes place. "Structured education gives you discipline and perspective. It helps you build a strong foundation, and strong values, so that your instincts later have something solid to stand on. It teaches you how to think, how to approach problems, and how to build consistency in what you do," he says. "But education doesn't stop with exams, the real growth happens on the floor, in service, in those moments of pressure when you have to make quick decisions, or when you learn from mistakes."

He believes true development also comes from travel, from visiting producers and exchanging ideas with others. "Teaching others reminds me how much there still is to discover. That's what keeps the profession exciting. It's a continuously evolving world."

He's also mindful of the gaps in current education systems.

**"It's about passion, humility, and the desire to connect people to the stories behind every bottle."**

While he believes the fundamentals are strong, he sees room for improvement. "I believe that, fundamentally, we already have a very strong structure, the foundations of wine knowledge, service standards, and tasting methodology are solid and well established," he says. "However, I do think there's still a certain bias in the educational focus."

I believe the modern sommelier needs more than just technical expertise. Our role today extends well beyond the dining room, we're involved in business operations, marketing, purchasing, leadership, and strategy. We're managing teams, budgets, and guest experiences in a much broader sense.

So while our core training is strong, I'd love to see more emphasis on business acumen, leadership development, and communication skills."

With the profession becoming more international, Saccone believes that education must follow suit. "The sommelier profession is truly global now. Exceptional producers are emerging from places that were once barely recognised on the wine map. This gives us a tremendous opportunity to expand our perspective."

He sees organisations like ASI as uniquely positioned to lead this evolution. "They can connect sommeliers from every corner of the world and create a shared platform for learning. By including more voices from emerging regions, we enrich the conversation and make education more inclusive."

When asked about the future of the profession, Saccone doesn't point to more qualifications or stricter standards. Instead, he highlights something more human. "The next step in the professionalisation of sommellerie will be integrating more leadership and emotional

intelligence into our work. Technical skill will always matter, but the future sommelier must understand business, communicate across cultures, and lead with empathy."

His advice to young sommeliers is refreshingly simple. "Be passionate, stay curious, and remain humble. Never lose sight of why we do this; it's to bring joy to people, to create memories, and to connect stories through wine. Don't be afraid to be yourself. Your authenticity is what transforms a service into a memorable experience."

As someone who continues to mentor, travel, and teach, Saccone remains deeply committed to the heart of the profession. "Knowledge is important," he says, "but hospitality is the heart of what we do. That genuine care for people is what turns a great sommelier into a truly unforgettable one."



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# Sommeliers INTERNATIONAL



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# New ASI Preparatory Level Exam: A Gateway to Global Sommelier Education

With Kristjan Markii, ASI Exams & Education Committee



Kristjan Markii

**The Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI) has introduced a new Preparatory Level certification to support the growing global demand for accessible, standardised sommelier education. This new entry-level offering is designed to create a smoother, more inclusive pathway into the profession, particularly for candidates in regions where formal wine education is still taking root.**

Kristjan Markii, President of the Estonian Sommelier Association (ESA) and member of the ASI Exams & Education Committee, explains the motivation behind this new initiative:

"In many countries, especially those without a long tradition of vine growing, students often begin their sommelier journey with very limited exposure to wine. Concepts that may feel intuitive in places like France or Italy are completely new to learners in the far north, south,

or across Asia. The Preparatory Level gives these beginners a chance to assess their foundational knowledge, while also offering ASI member associations a practical educational tool."

The new Preparatory Level is available to all ASI member countries at no cost, making it both an accessible starting point for candidates and a useful platform to introduce the format of ASI's more advanced Certifications and Diploma exams. This initiative is not only a response to the varying levels of access to education around the world. It's a step toward harmonising global standards while still allowing flexibility for local implementation.

"As the name suggests, it's a preparatory level," says Markii. "But beyond that, it acts as strong promotional material for what comes next. It's an opportunity to get students familiar with the ASI exam structure early on, helping demystify the process and encourage long-term engagement."

Although the exam is still in its early rollout stages, Markii notes that in Estonia, the ASI Preparatory Level is already being considered as a valuable addition to the country's introductory sommelier courses.

"We're planning to integrate it into our first-level curriculum at the Estonian Sommelier School. It's a way to evaluate students and motivate them to continue toward the next level of certifications," he explains.

Beyond technical benchmarking, the certification also plays a broader role in growing and diversifying the global sommelier community.

"Because of its low cost and ease of access, this new level allows every member association, regardless of size or resources, to offer something meaningful to their emerging professionals. It works in both directions. It draws in new talent, and it builds momentum for advancing to the ASI Certification and Diploma," says Markii.

Ultimately, the new Preparatory Level is about more than exam scores. It's about opening doors. In the words of Kristjan Markii, "it's both a stepping stone and an invitation."

**With this launch, ASI continues its mission to elevate and unify the sommelier profession worldwide, one level at a time.**



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## *Support ASI*

We're reaching out during an exceptionally difficult time for the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI). A recent cyber attack compromised our email system, resulting in the loss of critical funds through fraudulent invoices. This breach has jeopardised our ability to continue the core activities that support young sommeliers around the world.

As a volunteer-driven, non-profit organisation representing 75 national associations, ASI has long championed education, professional development, and international competitions.

**To recover, we've launched the Support ASI fundraising campaign on GoFundMe.**

Your donation, whether one-time or recurring, will help us continue educational programs and support events such as the upcoming Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific (Kuala Lumpur, 2025), Best Sommelier of the World (Portugal, 2026), and Bootcamp Americas (2026).

With your support, we can overcome this setback and secure the future of global sommellerie.

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# Beyond the Classroom:



## ASI's Global Sommelier Community Connects Sommeliers Worldwide

With Xeniya Volosnikova

With its evolving certifications, prestigious diploma programme, and professional development bootcamps, the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI) has steadily reshaped itself into a global leader in sommelier education. Now, with the launch of the ASI Global Sommelier Community, the association is taking another meaningful step forward. This time, focused on community.

At the heart of this initiative is **Xeniya Volosnikova**, a driving force behind the successful ASI Bootcamps and now, the architect of this new, inclusive platform. As she explains, the idea emerged organically from ASI's own community.

"When you put a bunch of passionate and talented sommeliers together, they naturally want to exchange ideas, to keep learning," says Volosnikova. "The ASI Bootcamps helped create that spark, but we saw it needed a space to continue to grow."

For years, ASI Bootcamps and competitions have provided a place where emerging and elite sommeliers could build lasting bonds. Yet, as Volosnikova points out, once participants returned to their home countries, momentum could fade. WhatsApp groups and unofficial forums often sprang up, but they lacked continuity, and reach.

"We noticed alumni were creating their own study groups after events," she recalls. "They were

useful but fragmented. So, it made sense to create something official, something structured, yet flexible, and open to members of our growing global family."

Though study support is its foundation, the platform is not intended to be just a study group.

"It's about professional growth, connection, and support," says Volosnikova. "Of course, we want to help those preparing for ASI certifications or the Diploma, but it's also about sharing job opportunities, online course links, vineyard visit tips, or even a word of encouragement. It's about building something that lives beyond the exam hall."

The initiative also acknowledges a hard truth: access to professional wine education is unequal. As someone who began her wine career in Kazakhstan, Volosnikova understands the unique barriers facing sommeliers from emerging wine regions.

"Growing up in Kazakhstan, I didn't have access to vineyard visits or

**"When you put a bunch of passionate and talented sommeliers together, they naturally want to exchange ideas, to keep learning."**

regular tastings. That came much later," she reflects. "Now, living in France, I realise how many resources are just one train ride away. The study group can bridge that gap or those living in the far corners of the globe."

The group also encourages a natural evolution from peer support to mentorship. With the first wave of invitations sent to diploma holders, certification achievers, and Bootcamp alumni, many members will already have walked the paths others are just beginning.

"We didn't frame it as a mentorship programme," Volosnikova explains. "But I believe that it will become that organically. People love to help, to share what they've learned. This space will make that easier."

"Having access to senior sommeliers from ASI Gold Diploma holders to past Best Sommelier of the World contestants can be an incredible resource for younger professionals. Even a short message of encouragement," says Volosnikova, "can be transformative."

"Not everyone would feel comfortable emailing Marc Almert or Raimonds Tomsons directly, even though we know how generous they are. This group gives sommeliers the chance to connect with those leaders in a more approachable, communal way."

The group, launching on LinkedIn, will be moderated by the ASI marketing and education team to ensure it remains a safe and productive space. It will operate under a clear set of community guidelines, reflecting ASI's Code of Ethics.

**Key rules include:**

no discrimination, harassment, or personal attacks; no sales, direct marketing, or self-promotion; all content must relate to sommelier



education, ASI events, or hospitality; and members are expected to respect confidentiality and intellectual property of shared materials.

"We want this to be a sanctuary for learning, not another space for sales," Volosnikova notes. "There are plenty of other platforms for commercial conversations. This one is for growth."

Membership is by invitation, but not exclusive. Eligible participants include holders of the ASI Diploma or Certifications (Levels 1 and 2), Bootcamp alumni, ASI competition participants and volunteers, and



**"It's also about sharing job opportunities, online course links, vineyard visit tips, or even a word of encouragement. It's about building something that lives beyond the exam hall."**



Marc Almert at Bootcamp

recognised representatives of ASI member associations. Sommeliers actively pursuing ASI qualifications are also welcome.

"If someone doesn't receive an invitation, but believes they qualify, they can absolutely reach out," says Volosnikova. "This is about inclusion, not exclusion."

The long-term vision is for the group to evolve into a fully interactive hub—where members not only prepare for exams but share research, plan joint study trips, form regional tasting groups, and help raise the overall standard of global wine service.

For Volosnikova, the study group is more than a project—it's deeply personal. She's built her career through education, hard work, and connection. Along the way, informal support from industry friends and peers helped her pass milestones and discover new paths.

And beyond access and education, there's another goal. It's about normalising the daily "craziness" of the sommelier life.

"Not everyone understands why we're tasting 15 Rieslings at 8 a.m., for example. But in this group, you'll find people who get it. That's the comfort of community."

The ASI Global Sommelier Community went live earlier this month, just one year ahead of the next ASI Best Sommelier of the World competition in Lisbon. The timing is no accident. The group could offer a vital resource to those preparing for that major career milestone.

"If you're preparing for a major ASI event, this group could be a support system, a motivation boost, or even the place you meet your next study partner," says Volosnikova.

In the weeks following launch, members can expect the first wave of shared content, including updated ASI Sommelier Guidelines, video tutorials, links to contest finals, and resources from partner organisations such as WSET, the Court of Master Sommeliers, and the International Bartender Association.

"We talk a lot about lifelong learning," Volosnikova concludes. "This group is one way of putting that into action, not just for exams, but for curiosity, connection, and community."

The ASI Global Sommelier Community is not a curriculum. It's not a lecture. It's a living, breathing network of professionals who believe that better sommeliers make a better industry. Whether you're a diploma holder or just beginning your journey, the door is open. If you've been part of an ASI event, check your LinkedIn inbox for an invitation. If you're not sure and want to be involved, reach out.

*The conversation has already begun.*



**ASI Global Sommelier Community**



# The ASI Gold Standard

With Léonard Lievin, ASI Diploma Gold

FEATURE ARTICLE



Léonard Lievin

**“Be curious.  
Be consistent.  
Don’t compare  
yourself  
too much.  
Everyone’s  
journey is  
different.”**

In the world of wine, education is often the unseen thread that weaves a sommelier’s career together. For **Léonard Lievin**, that thread runs deep and wide, spanning continents, languages, and multiple certification bodies. From the vineyards of Alsace to the fine dining rooms of Montréal and London, Lievin’s journey is one marked not only by constant self-improvement but by a quietly relentless passion for the craft.

Born in Alsace into a family that ran a hotel and restaurant, hospitality was not so much a career choice for Lievin as it was a natural inheritance. “I grew up in the restaurant, quite literally,” he says.

“As a kid, I was always on the sidelines watching my parents as they work. It felt normal. I didn’t realise how lucky I was to be surrounded by amazing food and wine in such a beautiful place until much later.”

Initially, though, he took a different path at the behest of his parents, studying computer programming at

university. But the pull of hospitality was strong. “Even while I was studying, I kept returning to the restaurant on weekends. I finished my degree, but I knew my heart belonged elsewhere,” he admits.

That quiet sense of certainty led him far from home. At 21, Léonard packed up and moved to Canada. “I applied everywhere—Australia, New Zealand, the US, but Canada was the first to say yes.” What followed were two formative years working in high-standard hospitality settings in Quebec. “At the time, it felt like a bold, maybe even naive decision. But I’ve always considered myself an opportunist. I try to take the right chance at the right time.”

The cold Canadian winters eventually pushed him to seek warmer climes, and he landed in the UK, specifically at the prestigious Lympstone Manor in Devon. “That was the turning point,” says Léonard. “The wine cellar, the team, the attention to detail. It was a different level. That’s when I really began to dive into wine education.”

The ASI Gold Standard

Since arriving in the UK, he hasn't stopped learning, beginning with WSET Levels 1 through 3, then the Diploma. He's completed the ASI Certifications, including recently being awarded the coveted ASI Diploma Gold. He's currently studying for the Court of Master Sommeliers' Advanced Exam and is already looking ahead to applying for the Master of Wine. When asked if his want to pursue education and attain certifications is a professional or personal choices he says "it's both. You have to love learning. You can't force this. At the same time, in a competitive environment like London, knowledge is essential. It sets you apart."

Lievin sees the various global certification bodies as complementary rather than competitive. "WSET gives you the trade and regional knowledge. The Court and ASI focus more on hospitality, service, and producers. Each fulfills a different part of the puzzle," he explains. "ASI, in particular, has really found its voice recently. The global scope, the international standard. It's a strong programme."

His ASI Gold Diploma, earned in under a year while also working towards the Advanced Court exam, was a particular milestone. "I'm a challenger. I want to be the best I can. Achieving ASI Gold was a great moment for me. It's more than a certificate. It's recognition of the hours, the effort, and the consistency."

Léonard has also drawn inspiration from some of the best in the business, particularly those from his home region. "Alsace is rich in sommelier history. I had the chance to attend masterclasses by Serge Dubs, who won Best Sommelier of the World in 1989, and Roman Ittis, another standout from the region. Their humility and humanity are just as impressive as their knowledge.

They remind you that hospitality is about people first."

This belief in humility and giving back is starting to shape his own future plans. While he still sees himself firmly planted in the restaurant world, Lievin is starting to look toward education. "I'd like to become a WSET educator. Not to leave the floor completely, but to combine it and help train the next generation while staying connected to service. It's important to raise the level of knowledge in your team. You don't have to be standing at a podium to teach. Sometimes it's just helping a young waiter pronounce a grape name or explain a region. That's where it starts."

Though he's competed in sommelier contests, including a runner-up finish in the UK Junior Sommelier of the Year contest, competitions aren't where his heart lies. "There's a lot of stress in competition. I enjoy

exams much more. Give me a quiet room, a glass of wine, and let me work. Competitions are for people who thrive under that kind of pressure. I'm happy to cheer them on from the sidelines."

For now, his focus is on the balance between work and study, service and teaching. But with a Master of Wine application in his sights, there's little doubt more milestones lie ahead. Still, he's not in a rush. "I've learned to take things step by step. You can't do everything at once. But if you keep moving forward, the results come."

As for his advice to young sommeliers? Lievin is clear: "Be curious. Be consistent. Don't compare yourself too much. Everyone's journey is different. But most of all, love what you do. The titles and certificates are great, but the real reward is in the discovery."



Léonard Lievin sees his future rooted in education tied to service

# Educating a Wine Future: Minobu Kondo's Vision for Hokkaido and Beyond

In a world where careers often follow conventional paths, **Minobu Kondo's** story is refreshingly unique. Once a flight attendant for Japan Airlines, she is now an ASI Diploma Gold recipient, wine educator, and a key figure behind the wine education initiative of NIKI Hills Winery in Hokkaido. Her journey reflects a growing movement in Japan: the rise of wine professionals committed not only to personal development, but also to the advancement of wine culture in emerging regions.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Educating a Wine Future: Minobu Kondo's  
Vision for Hokkaido and Beyond

Minobu's introduction to wine was gradual. Working as a flight attendant allowed her to taste wines from around the world and develop a curiosity about the subject. But it wasn't until she returned to Japan from the United States and began working at her current company – a major advertising and communications group – that she decided to take her passion further. Coincidentally, her company's CEO was a wine lover who had established NIKI Hills Winery in Yoichi, Hokkaido, more than a decade earlier.

At the time, Kondo had more wine knowledge than most of her colleagues thanks to her international exposure. Her co-workers, including the CEO, would regularly ask her wine-related questions which was a subtle encouragement that led her to pursue formal education. What began as a desire to support her company evolved into a deeper personal commitment.

**"I liked wine, but I wanted more accurate and deeper knowledge," she explains. "I passed the sommelier exam in Japan and then decided not to stop there."**

Minobu continued her studies with WSET Level 3 and the Diploma, a process she describes as intensive but incredibly rewarding. Shortly after earning her Diploma, she sat the ASI Diploma, earning the prestigious Gold designation.

"I didn't plan to go this far in the beginning," she admits, "but once I started, I found all things about wine fascinating including the history, the culture, the science. Everything is connected."

At home, her passion is shared with her husband, a lawyer and wine lover himself. They often blind taste together; an activity she jokes she usually wins.

While Kondo is based in Tokyo, her heart is clearly rooted in the north. The company's winery, NIKI Hills, sits in Yoichi, a small town in Hokkaido that has traditionally been associated with fruit growing, particularly apples. In recent years, however, the town has become known for its potential in winemaking, especially for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

**Minobu's mission is clear: to use education as a tool to transform this region into a thriving wine destination.** As director of the newly established NIKI Hills Winery Institute, she is building a WSET-certified school that will offer professional wine education not only to company employees, but eventually to the wider public.

**"What began as a desire to support her company evolved into a deeper personal commitment."**



Minobu Kondo



NIKI Hills Winery



FEATURE ARTICLE

**“Wine makes life richer. If I can share that with others, and especially help young people, I will be happy.”**

The vision goes beyond the classroom. Kondo sees education as a way to empower a new generation of wine professionals and breathe life into a rural area that, like many in Japan, is experiencing population decline. Her classes aim to inspire locals, especially young people, to consider careers in wine.

“In Hokkaido, there are not many wine schools,” she explains. “But now, people are starting to see the necessity. If we are going to be a wine region, we need wine knowledge.”

Though the school is still in its early stages, Kondo has already begun offering classes through the Japan Sommelier Association and has seen promising enthusiasm from students.

“Some of them are surprised at how interesting wine education is,” she says. “They didn’t expect to enjoy studying so much.”

When asked where she sees herself in five or ten years, Kondo doesn’t hesitate. She wants to grow the school and continue contributing to the region’s development.

“I want to help build the wine culture here,” she says. “Wine makes life richer. If I can share that with others, and especially help young people, I will be happy.”

Her story is a testament to what can happen when personal passion meets purpose. Through education, advocacy, and relentless curiosity, Minobu Kondo is not only elevating herself, she is helping to put Hokkaido on the global wine map.

*Educating a Wine Future: Minobu Kondo’s Vision for Hokkaido and Beyond*

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# Educating the Palate: Inside the Wines of Portugal Academy

By Mark DeWolf

FEATURE ARTICLE

Educating the Palate: Inside the Wines of Portugal Academy

**“Everywhere I go now, whether it’s Canada, South Korea or elsewhere, people are telling me they’ve just been to Portugal or are planning to go. There’s a buzz about Portugal. People want to learn more.”**

– Sofia Salvador

**W**hen Sofia Salvador joined ViniPortugal nearly 14 years ago, the world of Portuguese wine was already rich with tradition and diversity. Yet despite this, there was no consistent, structured approach to wine education. Today, as Head Educator of the Wines of Portugal Academy, Salvador is leading an ambitious global programme that is shaping how professionals and enthusiasts engage with Portuguese wine.

“We always did some form of education,” says Salvador. “We offered masterclasses during events, training sessions, and guided tastings in our rooms. But it wasn’t structured in any formal way.”

That changed in 2017 with the launch of the Wines of Portugal Academy. The idea originated from growing interest among wine professionals and educators at international events. The first structured partnership came in South Korea, with a wine school eager to incorporate Portuguese wine into its curriculum.

“There was real demand,” Salvador explains. “Wine schools wanted to include Portugal in their teaching. We realised we needed a proper educational programme to support that.”

Initially focused on professionals such as sommeliers, importers and retailers, the Academy was developed as a trade education tool. It soon expanded beyond South Korea to include partnerships in Canada, China and other key markets.

In the early days, Salvador personally trained instructors in each country. “I would travel to the school and teach the local educator. They already had to know a bit about Portuguese wine, but I guided them through our structure and materials.”

As the Academy gained recognition, the process became more streamlined. Today, wine schools from around the world approach ViniPortugal to express interest in becoming accredited providers.

“It’s often the schools who come to us now,” says Salvador. “We have requests from Mexico, Estonia and beyond. There’s a real appetite to teach about Portuguese wine.”

The Academy’s expansion coincides with the global rise in Portugal’s popularity as a wine and travel destination. In 2023, Portugal welcomed over 30 million tourists, many of whom connected their visit with wine and gastronomy experiences. This, says Salvador, has had a knock-on effect in wine education.

“Everywhere I go now, whether it’s Canada, South Korea or elsewhere, people are telling me they’ve just been to Portugal or are planning to go. There’s a buzz about Portugal. People want to learn more.”

The Wines of Portugal Academy offers two structured levels: Initiation and Intermediate. Each course is built around key learning pillars such as regions, grape varieties and Portugal’s unique wine identity. “At the Initiation level, we teach around ten of the main wine regions,” Salvador explains.

“We also cover ten native grape varieties that are central to Portugal’s wine identity.” These include reds such as Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Trincadeira, Tinta Roriz, Baga and Castelão, along with whites like Encruzado, Alvarinho, Arinto and Fernão Pires. The selection of these grapes is the result of a sector-wide decision by ViniPortugal and its members.

“In total, Portugal has more than 250 native grape varieties, all genetically catalogued,” says Salvador. “But we focus on ten to make it manageable, especially when teaching in different languages.”

The Intermediate level introduces all 14 wine regions and explores additional aspects such as terroir, soils and microclimates in more detail. Fortified wines, including Port, Madeira and Moscatel, are



**“In 2023, Portugal welcomed over 30 million tourists, many of whom connected their visit with wine and gastronomy experiences.”**



Sofia Salvador



also covered, along with iconic Portuguese producers and labels.

“There’s also a segment on food pairings,” she adds. “It’s general for now, but we hope to adapt it to local cuisines in the future.”

During the pandemic, in-person training came to a halt. In response, the Academy launched a six-module online version open to anyone, anywhere in the world.

“The Wines of Portugal Online Academy has been a great success,” says Salvador. “More than 5,200 people have completed the full course and earned a diploma.”

While the online format lacks the tasting element of the in-person sessions, it remains a valuable tool for building foundational knowledge and reaching new audiences.

“We’re seeing engagement from people all over the world. Some are professionals, others are wine lovers who visited Portugal and want to deepen their understanding.”

In addition to classroom and online learning, the Academy offers what Salvador calls “immersion

visits”. These week-long trips bring sommeliers, importers and educators to Portugal to experience its wine regions first-hand.

“We invite professionals from our strategic markets to visit vineyards, meet producers and taste wines in their native terroir,” she says. “It’s one of the most powerful ways to connect people to Portuguese wine.”

These visits often start with a masterclass led by Salvador, followed by guided tours across multiple regions. Beyond education, these trips frequently spark business opportunities. “People taste something in the masterclass, then meet the producer, and later begin importing that wine. It’s not always measurable, but we see the results.”

The Academy’s global credibility has been bolstered by its longstanding partnership with the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI). Through ASI events such as ASI Bootcamp, the Academy has introduced Portuguese wines to some of the world’s top emerging sommeliers. “I’ve taught at ASI Bootcamps in Poland and Seville,” says Salvador. “These sommeliers

**“I love my job. Every time I teach, the classes are full, and people are engaged. They thank you afterwards for the knowledge. That tells me we’re doing something meaningful.”**

– Sofia Salvador

are on the cusp of becoming the best in the world. Their level of knowledge is incredibly high."

At these events, she has witnessed a shift in familiarity with Portuguese wines. She elaborates "ten years ago, most sommeliers knew only Douro and Vinho Verde. Now, they recognise Encruzado or Castelão, and they understand the stylistic nuances between regions."

Still, she admits the journey is ongoing. "Some attendees still come in with limited knowledge. But what's exciting is their eagerness to learn. Portugal offers something different and something authentic."

While hard data on the Academy's business impact is limited, anecdotal evidence points to its effectiveness. She says "it's not always easy to measure in KPIs," Salvador acknowledges. "But after masterclasses or immersion visits, people often tell us they've started working with Portuguese wines or that they've made new connections."

Salvador highlights the role of the Academy in raising awareness and building relationships, even if it's not always immediately quantifiable.

"Wine education is about opening doors. Whether that leads to sales, partnerships or simply appreciation, it's all part of our mission."

Looking to the future, Salvador is focused on growing the Academy's reach and refining its content. A formal Advanced level is still in development, and work is ongoing to expand into new markets and languages.

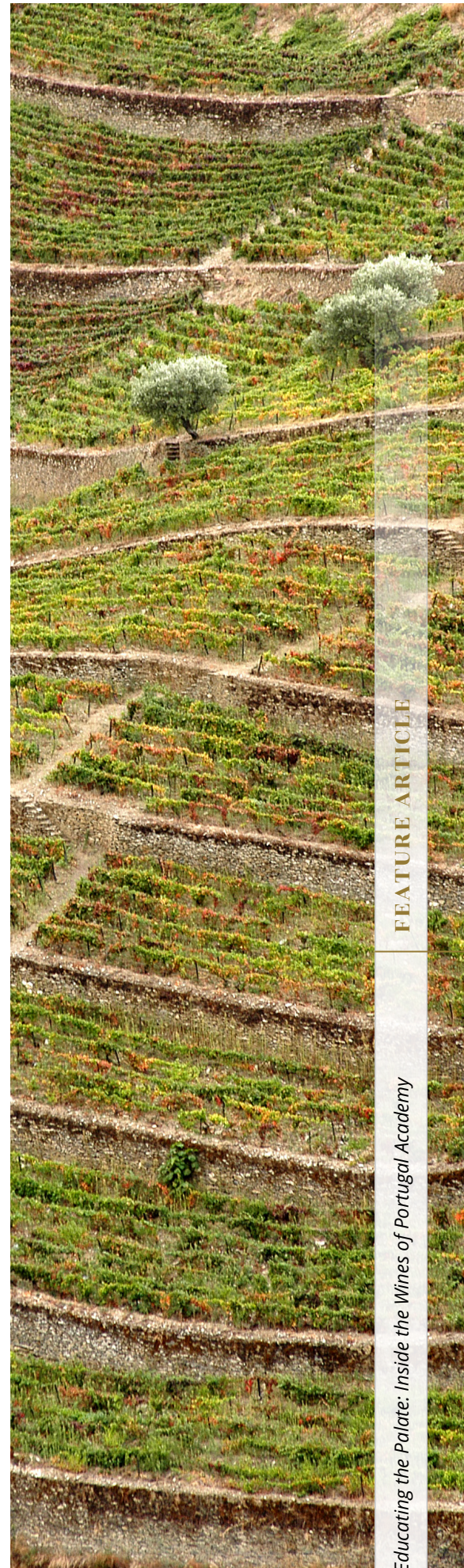
There are also logistical challenges. Inflation and shifting consumer habits have impacted registration numbers in some countries, such as South Korea. But ViniPortugal remains committed to making the programme accessible.

"We're adjusting our formats, alternating sessions between partner schools, and exploring new collaborations," Salvador says. "It's a continual process."

What keeps her motivated is the visible growth in awareness and appreciation for Portuguese wines. Sofia says, "I love my job. Every time I teach, the classes are full, and people are engaged. They thank you afterwards for the knowledge. That tells me we're doing something meaningful."

Whether it is a masterclass in Canada, an ASI Bootcamp in Spain or a trade visit to a vineyard in Alentejo, the Wines of Portugal Academy is redefining how Portuguese wine is presented to the world; by blending structured learning with immersive experiences and global partnerships, it is helping to elevate Portugal's place on the world wine stage.

As Salvador concludes, "there's always someone, somewhere in the world, ready to learn about Portuguese wine. That's what keeps us going."



Online Education Course

# Inside Symington Family Estates' School of Port

With Chelsea Oliveira, Symington Family Estates

**W**hen the pandemic forced the world to pause, the Symington family saw an opportunity to rethink how people learn about Port. The result was School of Port, an innovative educational platform designed to educate a global audience about their legendary Port wines and the Douro Valley.

"The School of Port concept was developed by Symington Family Estates in response to the coronavirus lockdown as a way of continuing the training sessions which had previously taken place offline," explains Symington Family Estates' Chelsea Oliveira. "A big part of our work is educating people about the Port category. Often, people who don't know about Port become enthusiastic once they learn more and taste the wines."

FEATURE ARTICLE

Inside Symington Family Estates' School of Port





According to Oliveira, education has long been central to Symington Family Estates' mission, both through in-person experiences and trade training.

"Education has always been a core part of Symington, either through our visitor experiences in Porto and the Douro or through initiatives like School of Port and the Douro Somm Camp," says Oliveira. "We aim to help people understand the region, the craft, and the traditions behind Port."

The School of Port extends that philosophy by making accurate, engaging, and up-to-date information available to anyone, anywhere. Symington's long heritage underpins the programme, but Oliveira is clear that its focus is educational rather than promotional.

"Our goal with School of Port is to share knowledge about the entire Port category, so our courses are brand-neutral and focus on providing a solid understanding of Port," she says. "Although we draw on Symington's expertise to ensure our information is accurate and engaging, the focus is always on

representing the region and its wines in an inclusive, educational way."

The School of Port currently offers a range of online video courses, all of which are free and open to the public.

"Participants simply visit [schoolofport.com](http://schoolofport.com), register for free, and can immediately start learning," Oliveira explains. "We currently offer two core courses: The Essentials and The Masters, as well as more specific modules such as Le Portofesseur, The Cocktail Series, and The Portorials."

The Essentials takes around two hours to complete, while The Masters runs closer to two and a half. Each course ends with an online multiple-choice test, after which successful participants receive a personalised certificate.

"The Essentials introduces participants to the fundamentals of Port," Oliveira says. "The Masters takes a more advanced look at production, ageing, and bottling, with guest speakers providing first-hand experience and unique insight into their craft."

**"The School of Port extends that philosophy by making accurate, engaging, and up-to-date information available to anyone."**

## “School of Port aims to generate visibility, understanding, and excitement about the category in general.”

While The Essentials is not a prerequisite, Oliveira recommends taking it first.

“The Masters builds on that foundation, offering more technical detail and real-world insight through guest speakers directly involved in production and ageing.”

Another strength of the School of Port is its network of international partners.

“It’s important to us that prospective partners are already familiar with the wine industry, such as wine schools or trade professionals,” notes Oliveira. “Once approved, we provide a training programme tailored to their level of Port knowledge, delivered by our team of Port Educators to ensure they share the right message in the right tone.”

Symington ensures accuracy and neutrality by supplying teaching materials and providing regular updates to partners’ content.

Although educational in nature, the School of Port naturally supports Symington’s broader visibility and engagement.

“School of Port aims to generate visibility, understanding, and excitement about the category in general,” says Oliveira. “We typically use wines from our different Port houses when conducting tastings, unless the event is run in partnership with another producer.

In addition, School of Port runs the Douro Somm Camp, an annual immersive educational bootcamp hosted at our own estates.”

This approach helps build long-term ambassadors for Port, both in the trade and among consumers.

“A great example is the sale of two Graham’s Bicentenary Collection cases to sommeliers who had taken part in Douro Somm Camp,” Oliveira recalls. “Beyond direct sales, the impact of School of Port is about visibility, reaching an audience who go on to become informed ambassadors for the category, the Douro region, and our wines.”

For Oliveira and her team, the work is far from done.

“We’re continuing to expand our educational reach through in-person masterclasses, workshops, and collaborations with our global partners,” she says. “Our team of Port Educators regularly leads sessions for the trade (including numerous partnerships with ASI), helping deepen their understanding and appreciation of Port.”

As interest in the Douro’s still wines grows, the School of Port may broaden its curriculum to reflect this increasingly important part of regional production. But for now, the focus remains on the legendary Port wines that made the Douro famous.



[schoolofport.com](https://schoolofport.com)

# Learning from the Source: Global Wine Boards Elevate Education

Around the world, regional wine boards are stepping beyond promotion to become educators, shaping the next generation of professionals. From California's Capstone and Rioja's Wine Academy to the Wines of Portugal Academy, these programmes offer structured, certified learning directly from the source—blending culture, terroir, and technical mastery online.



## Capstone California, California Wine Institute

- Created by the Wine Institute's California wine export arm.
- Offers four levels starting with Introductory and culminating in Ambassador. Courses cover history, geography, viticulture, wine law, producers, exports, etc.
- Self-paced online learning, with guided tastings, and certification upon passing examinations.
- Example: Level 1 is approximately 6 hours of curriculum with tastings.



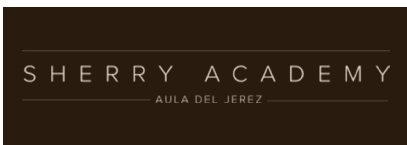
## Rioja Wine Academy, Consejo Regulador DOCa Rioja

- Free online courses at multiple levels (Enthusiast, Tasting, Diploma) with assessments, culminating in the Rioja Wine Diploma.
- Also a Certified Rioja Wine Educator programme, combining online learning + final essay +, for selected candidates, an in-region educational trip ("Rioja Camp") organised by the board itself.
- The board issues an official certificate for completion.



## Champagne Education, Comité Champagne

- Offers three levels of free, certified e-learning: Explorer, Connoisseur, and Expert (the Expert level is being rolled out) covering Champagne history, terroir, viticulture, production, and tasting.
- The first two levels are currently available; passing a level gives you a certificate from the Comité Champagne.
- The platform also supplies supplementary resources (quizzes, fact sheets, webinars) and the interprofessional board subsidises or finances the courses to make them accessible.



### Sherry Academy, Consejo Regulador Jerez / DO Jerez-Xérès / Manzanilla

- Provides Basic and Advanced 100 per cent online courses free of charge, with modules on viticulture, winemaking, styles, tasting, regulation, and gastronomic pairing.
- Completion of each course includes a certificate issued (signed by the President of the Regulatory Board) and a verifiable credential.
- Also offers specialised e-learning courses: Sherry Vinegar, Wine Tourism in the region, Front-of-House staff training, etc.
- There is an Advanced Course of Jerez-Xérès-Sherry y Manzanilla module available through the platform.



### New Zealand Wine Discovery Course, New Zealand Winegrowers

- Self-taught online programme that covers New Zealand’s wine regions, key grape varieties, sustainability practices, and what makes New Zealand wine distinct.
- Estimated completion time is approximately one hour; includes a multiple-choice exam, and on passing, students receive a Certificate of Completion.
- The course provides downloadable textbook and resource materials to supplement learning, and it is entirely online (no in-person requirement).



### German Wine Scholar®, Wine Scholar Guild with strong tie to German Wine Institute (DWI)

- A full, in-depth online programme focused exclusively on German wines, covering all 13 wine regions, grape varieties (Riesling, Spätburgunder, Silvaner, etc.), climate, wine law, history, and styles.
- Can be done via online self-study or educator-led modules; includes a final exam (100 questions, multiple-choice) with certification upon passing.
- While not operated directly by the German Wine Institute (DWI), the German Wine Institute releases educational materials and supports general German wine marketing, making this programme complementary to board efforts.



### Cava Academy, D.O. Cava / Cava Regulatory Board

- Offers a 100% online, self-paced “Cava Academy” version, aimed at professionals and enthusiasts wanting deeper knowledge of Cava.
- Covers topics such as history, DO regulations, permitted grapes, production methods, styles, gastronomy pairings, and classification.
- After passing the course, participants may earn the Cava Educator / Trainer title and submit a thesis for “Expert” level.
- Also note: there’s an on-site component (in-person masterclasses) from time to time in different cities.

# A Toast to a New Chapter: ASLIB and An-Nahar News Unite to Launch Lebanon's First International Sommelier Academy

Joseph Mounayer, ASI Middle East Correspondent

In the heart of Beirut, amid the historic walls of Annahar media group headquarters, a visionary partnership was sealed, one that could redefine Lebanon's position on the global wine map. The Association of Sommeliers in Lebanon (ASLIB) and Annahar Academy have officially joined forces to launch Lebanon's first international sommelier Academy, a groundbreaking project set to blend tradition, innovation, and world-class education in the art of wine and hospitality.

Earlier this October, **Joseph Mounayer**, President of ASLIB and Middle East Correspondent for ASI Magazine, met with **Nayla Tueni**, CEO and Editor-in-Chief of Annahar Media Group, to sign a Memorandum of Understanding that lays the foundation for this ambitious endeavor. The new Academy aims not only to nurture future generations of sommeliers but also to serve as a cultural bridge, promoting Lebanon's deep-rooted wine heritage and Mediterranean hospitality to an international audience.

"This partnership represents a major step forward for Lebanon and ASLIB," said Mounayer.

"We are honored to collaborate with Annahar Academy, whose legacy, vision, and commitment to excellence align perfectly with our mission to elevate Lebanese wine and hospitality education to global standards."

The signing ceremony was followed by an elegant and heartfelt cocktail reception, where leading figures from Lebanon's wine, culinary, and media industries gathered to celebrate this milestone. Wines were graciously presented by Muse du Liban, whose initiative played a pivotal role in bringing the partnership to life.

Guests included some of Lebanon's most respected sommeliers, members of Annahar's editorial and management teams, and prominent representatives from the hospitality and tourism sectors, Skarya Winery, all united by a shared belief in the transformative power of education and collaboration.

"We are especially thankful to Muse du Liban for their inspiration and support, and to Annahar's incredible team for making us feel so welcome," added Mounayer. "My sincere appreciation also goes to Mr. Lucien Chehwan for his



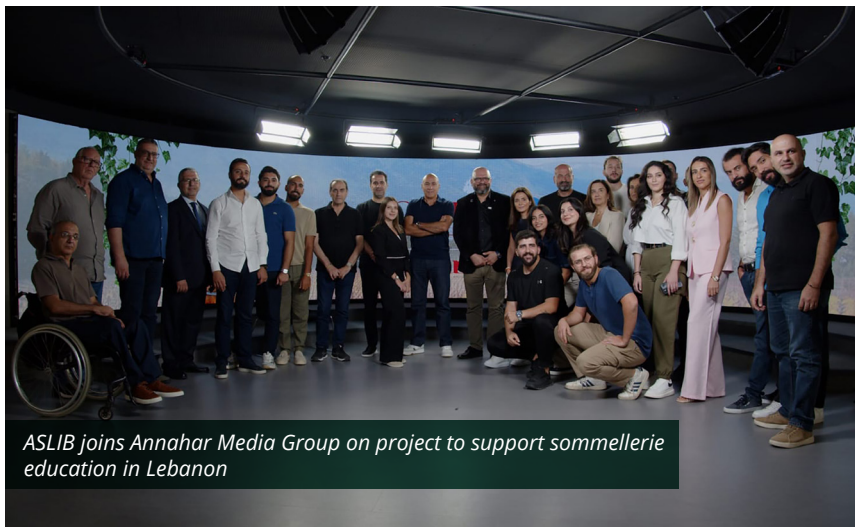
**"The new Academy aims not only to nurture future generations of sommeliers but also to serve as a cultural bridge."**

invaluable support and presence during this important milestone, to Benita Fakhry, ASLIB's General Secretary, for her tireless dedication and behind-the-scenes efforts, and to everyone who contributed to making this event such a success."

The Sommelier Academy will welcome its first class of students in early 2026, offering internationally recognised education and certification programmes in Lebanon for the very first time. The curriculum will be designed in collaboration with global partners, ensuring that graduates receive training on par with leading academies in Europe and beyond.

This collaboration also reflects Annahar's Media Group growing influence beyond journalism, as the institution continues to embrace education, innovation, and cultural development as core elements of its mission. Shortly after the MOU signing, Nayla Tuani received the Marketing Leadership & Innovation Award from Impact BBDO, recognising her trailblazing role in shaping modern Lebanese media and her commitment to empowering the country's creative industries.

In addition to its role in the new Academy, Annahar Media Group will also serve as the main media partner for the upcoming "Best Sommelier of Lebanon" competition.



ASLIB joins Annahar Media Group on project to support sommelier education in Lebanon

A key event that reinforces its dedication to promoting excellence, professionalism, and authenticity within Lebanon's wine and hospitality sectors.

With ASLIB's international expertise and Annahar Academy's cultural reach, the International Sommelier Academy is set to become a regional hub for professional training, exchange, and innovation. A place where passion for wine meets academic rigor, and where Lebanon's ancient winemaking tradition finds renewed expression on the global stage.

As the evening in Beirut drew to a close, glasses were raised not just to celebrate a partnership, but to toast a shared vision that Lebanon's story, like its finest wines, continues to evolve, mature, and grow richer with time.



**ASI Mag Regional Correspondent**

Joseph Mounayer (Middle East)

**ReadyToWrite**

## EDUCATION ACTIONS TO BE CARRIED OUT IN 2025

**09** Training activities organised by Wines of Portugal Academy as part of the Marketing Plan

**20** Training agreements between the Wines of Portugal Academy and local partners as well as International Partners

**19** Training courses offered by the Wines of Portugal Academy on the domestic market

## WINES OF PORTUGAL EDUCATION

Intervention in the national market is essentially carried out in two ways: Professional Training and Education of Tourists who visit us. Regarding the former, Wines of Portugal has developed a vast training program under the umbrella of Wines of Portugal Academy, aimed at training in wines for both catering professionals (e.g.: Restauration Associations and TAP, the Portuguese Airline company) and sales advisors for large distribution.

The later focuses mainly on the two tasting rooms in Lisbon and Porto, where visitors, mainly foreigners, can sample Portuguese wines either through free tastings or themed tastings, in which an expert presents the wines, grape varieties and regions of origin.

At an international level the intervention is being increasingly oriented towards the training of professionals and consumer education, based on the Training and Education Program of the Wines of Portugal Academy and in partnership with third parties such as Wine Schools or Sommelier Associations.

Of particular note is the online format of the Wines of Portugal Academy, a free platform where consumers and professionals can freely access the Academy program, available on the Wines of Portugal website. People can obtain knowledge through six informative modules that cover a variety of topics related to the Portuguese wine sector, from history, wine regions, grape varieties, wine styles and food pairing and each module is followed by a multiple-choice test/quiz.

**W** WINES OF PORTUGAL ACADEMY

wines of portugal **P**

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# Member News



## Vanessa Tan Named Champion of the 16<sup>th</sup> Singapore National Sommelier Competition

**Vanessa Tan** of Praelum Wine Bar in Duxton Hill, a historic neighbourhood in Tanjong Pagar has been crowned Champion of the 16th Singapore National Sommelier Competition. The contest was held earlier this month during the Grape Escape Wine Festival at Parkroyal on Beach Road.

At just 28, Tan represents the next generation of sommeliers redefining wine service in Singapore; one

that is thoughtful, confident, and deeply rooted in both technical mastery and hospitality. Her win signals not only professional excellence but a broader shift toward a more diverse and dynamic sommelier culture.

Tan also took home the Best Theory and Best Sparkling Wine Service awards, impressing an esteemed international panel led by **Kevin Lu MS**, **Annette Scarfe MW**, and **Jackie Ang MW**. Having started her hospitality career behind the bar before moving into wine, her journey reflects the breadth of paths now leading to the top of the profession.

She now joins an elite circle of sommeliers shaping Singapore's beverage scene, and in doing so, shows that the future of wine in the Lion City is bold, evolving, and proudly local.

MEMBER NEWS

## Lithuania Crowns New Champion

On 15 September, the Lithuanian Sommelier Association hosted the Lithuanian Sommelier Championship 2025 Codorníu Zero Grand Prix, celebrating the country's top wine professionals in an exciting showcase of skill and knowledge. After a day of rigorous competition, **Ignatij Semionov** emerged as the champion, earning the national title and the admiration of his peers. His victory highlights the growing strength and sophistication of Lithuania's sommelier community on the international stage.





## Dominique Milardi Assumes New Role with ASI

Monaco's **Dominique Milardi** has officially accepted the role of ASI Liaison Officer, a position central to advancing the association's educational goals. Giuseppe Vaccarini, former ASI President and current Co-Director Exams & Education Committee, expressed his confidence in Milardi's appointment, noting, "it is with great pleasure that we welcome Dominique Milardi as the new ASI Liaison Officer. We are confident that his experience and dedication will bring valuable contributions to this ambitious and meaningful project." Vaccarini also thanked outgoing officer Tim Vollerslev for establishing a strong foundation and said he looks forward to working with Milardi toward a "comprehensive and effective syllabus" supporting candidates' pursuit of excellence.



## Eric Zwiebel Moves to Mayfair's Bonheur

Esteemed sommelier **Eric Zwiebel**, ASI Diploma Gold, MS has accepted the position of Head Sommelier at Bonheur, the highly anticipated first solo venture from Chef Matt Abé, former Chef Patron of the three-Michelin-star Restaurant Gordon Ramsay. Set to open at the iconic 43 Upper Brook Street in Mayfair, the former home of Le Gavroche, Bonheur promises to honour and extend the site's storied tradition of mentorship and excellence. With Zwiebel's encyclopaedic knowledge, refined palate, and passion for nurturing young talent, Bonheur's wine programme is poised to be as thoughtful and inspiring as its cuisine, furthering the legacy of collaboration between kitchen and cellar that defines the finest houses in gastronomy.

# Industry News

## The Trump Dump

With the U.S. applying a 15% tariff on EU wines and spirits as of 1 August 2025, American restaurateurs are bracing for a squeeze just as holiday bookings ramp up.

According to Reuters, trade reporting and mainstream business press flag likely menu repricing, especially for by-the-glass, where small changes to per ounce pricing cascade through distributor and venue margins. Early modelling suggests the levy adds roughly \$0.23 per litre (€ 0.20/L) at wholesale for wine, with steeper pass-throughs on premium SKUs; expect lists to swap in domestics, South America, and non-EU Europe to hold price points in popular categories. According to the same report, Industry groups warn the tariff could erase nearly \$2 billion (€ 1.73 billion) in U.S.

alcohol sales and jeopardise 25,000 hospitality jobs, intensifying pressure to simplify assortments and trim slower movers through Q4. For guests, that translates into 5 to 15 per cent increases on many bottle and glass prices, plus fewer niche European wines making it to by the glass programmes.



ASI CONTEST BEST SOMMELIER  
OF THE WORLD

**OCTOBER 11-17, 2026**