

ASI MAGAZINE

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YEAR IN REVIEW 2025



IN MY GLASS
Mark DeWolf



SOMMELLERIE IN 2025, REGIONAL REPORTS
Matias Prezioso, Piotr Kamecki, Saiko Tamura-Soga, Michèle Chantôme



DISCUSSING THE FUTURE OF VINHOS VERDES

WITH DIRCEU VIANNA JUNIOR, MASTER OF WINE

Demarcated Region since 1908

VINHOS VERDES



A **Sommelier's** Insight

ASI Partners





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Welcome!

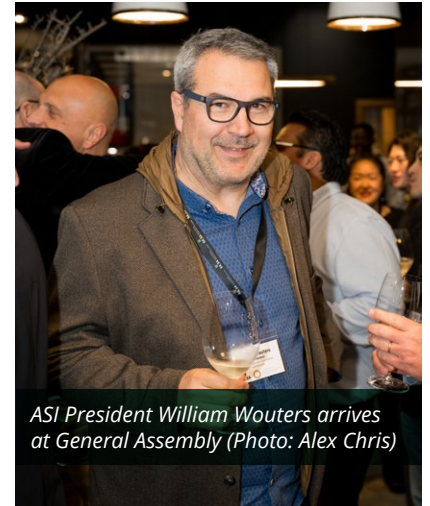


William Wouters,
President ASI

As we look back on the past year, I find myself filled with gratitude. Gratitude for your support, your trust, and above all, your remarkable spirit. This was a year that asked much of us, and yet it also reminded me why the ASI community is something truly special. When challenges arise, we don't fall apart. We come together.

The discovery of fraud activities that led to the theft of association funds could have shaken us to the core. Instead, it revealed our strength. With honesty, teamwork, and the steady support of our committee members, member associations, and partners, the Board acted quickly and decisively. You stood with us. You reminded us that ASI is built not on accounts or systems, but by people for people. We share a passion and friendship that binds our souls. Something, unlike money, that cannot be taken from us. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your support.

Amid all this, the work of ASI not only continued, but it flourished. Our ASI Bootcamp, held in Singapore, once again showed why it has become one of our most cherished educational programmes. Its nomination for the Vinexpo V d'Or Award for Best Education & Transmission – Wine is a proud moment for all of us. This recognition honours not just a training programme, but a philosophy: that together we can lift each other higher.



ASI President William Wouters arrives at General Assembly (Photo: Alex Chris)

“If there is one thing that gives me the most hope, it is our young sommeliers. At every continental contest this year, we saw an extraordinary number of talented young competitors.”



Perlage Gala Dinner at the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the Americas (Photo: Will Bucquoy)

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

William Wouters, President ASI

ASI executives and committee members at the ASI General Assembly in Cape Town
(Photo: Alex Chris)



ASI President William Wouters addresses General Assembly
(Photo: Alex Chris)



“The future of ASI is not approaching. It is already here, stepping confidently onto the stage.”

Education remained at the forefront in other ways too. This year we expanded the ASI Guidelines with brand-new Beer and Sake Guidelines, reflecting the evolving world of the modern sommelier. These additions help us better support our members, strengthen the ASI Certification pathway, and celebrate the wide, delicious world of beverages that enriches our profession.

But if there is one thing that gives me the most hope, it is our young sommeliers. At every continental contest this year, we saw an extraordinary number of talented young competitors. Their bright faces, curious minds, and brave hearts speak to the future of our profession. Their enthusiasm is contagious. Their dedication reminds us all why we first fell in love with this profession.

The future of ASI is not approaching. It is already here, stepping confidently onto the stage.

This Year in Review issue celebrates all of this: our achievements, our growth, and above all, the resilience of our beautiful community.

I am proud of what we have accomplished, but even more proud of how we accomplished it together.

Thank you for your kindness, your collaboration, and your friendship throughout this journey. ASI moves forward because of you. And as always, I remain honoured to serve this wonderful family.

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

William Wouters, President ASI

In My Glass



Mark DeWolf
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The Sommelier's Table: wine, cuisine, and the conversations that defined my year

IN MY GLASS

**"It's been a year
of generosity:
of time,
of insight,
and of spirit."**

As the year winds down, I find myself lingering a little longer with each glass, letting it hold not just aromas and flavours, but the memory of the conversations that shaped the past twelve months of ASI Magazine. It's been a year of generosity: of time, of insight, and of spirit. As I look back, I can't help but picture what it would be like to gather some of my favourite interviewees around a table, sharing a meal that's as layered and expressive as the people who inspired me issue after issue.

I imagine starting the evening with **Cokie Ponikvar** (ASI Magazine, Issue #23) whose youthful energy, intellect and quiet confidence reminded me of a time in my own life when life was still what I wanted to make of it. Across from her would be **Dr. Laura Catena** (ASI Magazine, Issue #19), a force of nature in the best possible way. I reflect on our conversation quite often, as her determination, self-confidence yet pragmatic approach to business and home life resonated with me.

Mark DeWolf: Editor, Content Manager

I entered that interview looking for an inspiring story of a woman who broke barriers in the wine industry. I entered that interview expecting a story about breaking barriers in wine; I left with a lesson in leadership that transcends profession, gender, and industry.

Somewhere in the middle of the table might be **Marc Pinto** (ASI Magazine, Issue #23). I love interviews when a simple question leads the interviewee on a life journey. Marc's story is one of perseverance and determination. A journey that took him from the lowest rungs of hospitality to the heights of sommellerie. A journey defined by a relentless and unwavering pursuit of a goal. It was a career path that took him abroad before a return to his home of Portugal allowed him to reconnect to his past, and to the wines of his home.

I didn't quite know what to expect for an interview I had with **Dirceu Vianna Junior MW** (A Sommelier's Insight Podcast, Season 2, Episode 7) about Vinho Verde. To become a Master of Wine requires a certain cerebral acumen, which at times can lead to conversations that are thoughtful, intellectual, but occasionally soulless. I found Dirceu remarkably grounded and real. Our discussion of Vinho Verde was a positive and honest exploration into the current and future state of an appellation that has metamorphosed into one of the world's most exciting white wine producing regions but still sitting on the cusp of acceptance into the premium fine wine world.

And then there's the inspirational story of **Samira Kakh** (ASI Magazine, Issue #24), an Iranian woman who has embraced the cultural history of Persian wine and

has overcome societal norms to follow her passion for wine. I had a prepared for one story based on my own western bias of what a I assumed an Iranian born and raised Muslim woman would be like. I came out a better person, with a more layered view on Iranian society, and with the knowledge that passion and determination can transcend all.

Cheers



Amuse Bouche

Guest: Cokie Ponikvar

Dish: Oysters on the Half Shell

Pairing: A trio of traditional method sparkling wines



When you are young and have everything ahead of you there an English phrase "the world's your oyster."

Apropos for Cokie who life's journey is just starting, albeit at a frantic pace. In the interview, I came to learn her brother lives in Nova Scotia, where I do. The obvious match is Nova Scotia oysters paired with 'one of my favourite Nova Scotia sparkling wines, Lightfoot & Wolfville Blanc de Blancs, which like Cokie is full of energy and promise. Of course, knowing Cokie, we'd have not only have that wine, but a couple others such as a Champagne, and Franciacorta. With Cokie we would taste them blind and chat about techniques to separate them out on a blind tasting exam.



First Course

Guest: Dirceu Vianna Junior MW

Dish: White Beans with Anchovy, Roasted Garlic, White Miso EVOO emulsion, Shio-kōji Roasted Enoki Mushrooms

Pairing: Vintage Vinho Verde from Monção e Melgaço sub-region

I found Dirceu Vianna Junior MW to be both complex but also slightly unexpected. I can imagine that if coming to a dinner party he might bring something the guests would not expect such as vintage Vinho Verde. I can also imagine something slightly unexpected on the plate. A dish that would blend Portuguese tradition with some umami-rich Japanese flavours to find harmony with the developed notes in the wine.

Second Course

Guest: Dr. Laura Catena

Dish: Pan Roasted Trout, Muña-Muña Scented Amaranth

Pairing: Catena Zapata Chardonnay



Main Course

Guest: Samira Kakh

Dish: Shirin Polo with Lamb (Iranian rice dish topped with braised lamb) with pistachios

Pairing: Iranian Alicante

The Catena family were pioneers of high elevation vineyard plantings in Mendoza. Dr. Laura's commitment to promoting biodiversity and embracing her Andes terroir, would be reflected in the dish I'd pair.

Trout was introduced to the Argentine Andes over that last two hundred years. Like grape vines, they aren't indigenous but now a natural part of the ecosystem. I would serve this over Muña-Muña (like wild mint) infused Amaranth (a native Andes grain). A simple dish but rooted in high-elevation terroir.

In my interview with Samira, I was surprised to learn there is an underground distillation and winemaking tradition. Her father and brother make wine with

Alicante, which Samira describes as being in a fruit-forward style, as there are no oak barrels available for aging. I can imagine standing over a stove chatting with Samira as we add orange peel, dried fruits, nuts and spices. Topped with some simple braised lamb and a finishing touch of pistachios, which her family harvests.

IN MY GLASS

Dessert

Guest: Marc Pinto

Dish: Bolo de Azeita (Olive Oil Cake)

Wine: Moscatel do Douro



During my discussion with Marc Pinto, we chatted about his own journey revisiting the wines of Portugal since his return to Lisbon after years living on the other side of the border. I can imagine Marc serving a wine that reflects the history and traditions of Portugal but perhaps not the most expected. A dessert wine such as a Moscatel do Douro reflects this. I am not a baker per se, but I love making olive oil cake. I can imagine making one with olive oil from the Duoro and when it comes out of the oven pouring some of the Moscatel over the cake to infuse it with citrus and apricot flavours.



Mark DeWolf: Editor, Content Manager

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The Year of Sommellerie that Was in the Americas

With Matias Prezioso,
ASI Vice-President Americas



2025 was a defining year for sommellerie across the Americas, marked by milestones that broadened the region's visibility, diversity, and ambition. From a landmark continental championship in Sonoma to historic advancements in South America and the Caribbean, the year showcased a profession evolving beyond its traditional centres. The rise of new voices, new member countries, and new educational pathways signalled a shift toward a more inclusive and regionally representative future. At the same time, the achievements of individual sommeliers from Canada and the United States to Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic and elsewhere highlighted the extraordinary breadth of talent shaping the beverage landscape today. Taken together, 2025 stands as a transformative chapter, redefining what excellence means in the Americas.

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Year of Sommellerie that Was in the Americas



ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the Americas 2025

Feb 17-21 | Sonoma, California

A Landmark Continental Contest in Sonoma

The ASI Best Sommelier of the Americas 2025 marked a historic milestone as it was held for the first time in the United States, reinforcing that country's growing role in the global sommelier ecosystem. **Joris Garcia** (ASI Gold Diploma) of Canada narrowly edged out **Mark Guilladeu** (ASI Gold Diploma, Master Sommelier) to take home the title. The contest held in Sonoma also produced another defining regional moment when **Nicolás Reines** of Colombia reached the podium, finishing in third place. For Colombia, a country without a deep-rooted domestic wine-production culture, this achievement signalled a remarkable rise. Reines' performance not only showcased the technical excellence emerging from non-traditional wine nations but also sent a powerful message to younger sommeliers across Latin America: excellence is possible regardless of geography or local industry limitations.



Argentina's Valeria Mortara Recognised as a Leading Voice in Hospitality

Valeria Mortara, Head Sommelier at Buenos Aires' celebrated **Anchoita**, was honoured with the "*Guiding Spirit for Wine in Hospitality*" award. Her work represents the best of modern Latin American sommellerie as the award recognises her combination of deep knowledgeable, service-driven attitude, and relentless commitment to guest experience. Mortara's recognition also underscores a broader shift in sommelier excellence in the Americas which bridges wine knowledge with leadership, mentorship, and service culture.



Venezuela Hosts the ASI EEC Meeting and Beverage Masterclasses

In an important moment for northern South America, Venezuela hosted the 2025 annual meeting of the ASI Examinations & Education Committee (EEC). The gathering was accompanied by a series of masterclasses celebrating Venezuelan cacao, rum, cocuy, and coffee; a showcase of the country's distinctive terroirs and craft traditions. This event highlighted the expanding educational presence of ASI in the Americas and reinforced the idea that sommeliers must master not only wine but the full beverage landscape, especially culturally significant regional products. This integration was highlighted by 3 Venezuelan sommeliers achieving the rank of ASI Diploma recipients in 2025.



Colombia Becomes an ASI Active Member

A pivotal step for Latin American representation came when Colombia was formally admitted as an Active Member of ASI at the 2025 General Assembly in Cape Town. This milestone cements Colombia's place within the global sommelier network, giving its professionals full voting rights, deeper access to ASI certification pathways, and increased visibility on the international stage. Combined with Reines' podium finish in Sonoma, Colombia's presence in the Americas' sommelier community has never been stronger.



Growth of Education & Inclusivity Across North America

Beyond competitions, 2025 also saw a notable rise in education, access, and inclusivity initiatives across the United States and Canada. Programmes such as Wine Unify, SommFoundation scholarships, CAPS-led competitions and training modules, and CMS-Americas' expanded SKA (Sommelier Knowledge Assessment) contributed to broader professional development.

These initiatives are reshaping who can become a sommelier in the Americas. By supporting BIPOC professionals, early-career sommeliers, and those from non-traditional backgrounds, they represent a structural evolution. One that strengthens the profession's long-term diversity, regional reach, and global competitiveness.



Rise of Caribbean Sommeliers

The Caribbean continues to see a rise in sommellerie, led by the Dominican Republic who hosted their inaugural "Best Italian Wine Sommelier Competition" in 2026, notably won by **Andrés Meschisi**.

The competition strengthened Italian wine culture in the Dominican Republic and showcased the growing competitiveness of wine professionals in the country. The Dominican Republic also had outstanding representation at ASI 1 and 2 examinations, with **Federico Díaz** becoming the first from the Dominican Republic to obtain ASI 2 certification. Showing the broad strength of the country, sommelier **Rafael Alexander Sánchez** represented the Dominican Republic at the ASI Best Sommelier of the Americas competition, performing a high-level job and carrying it out with dignity and professionalism.

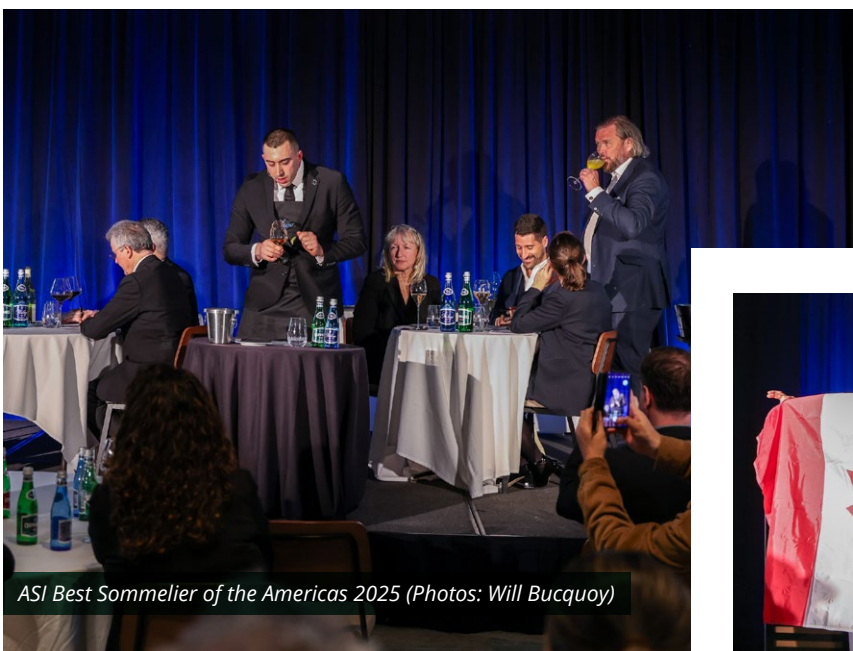


Brazil Enriches Its Global Links

The Associação Brasileira de Sommeliers, for the first time, proctored ASI Certification 1 and 2 examinations. Participating in these exams was an extremely significant milestone for the sommelier association as it supports international recognition for sommeliers working in South America's most populous country. The Association also hosted Sommelier Week ("La Semana del Sommelier"), created to celebrate National Sommelier Day on August 29. During the week, all the regional associations came together for an intensive programme of technical tastings, masterclasses, and conferences. This initiative not only paid tribute to the profession but also celebrated the passion that drives sommellerie in the country, promoting integration, knowledge, and recognition of the field.

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Year of Sommellerie that Was in the Americas



ASI Best Sommelier of the Americas 2025 (Photos: Will Bucquoy)



Seven Sommeliers Making Waves in the Americas



Mario Astudillo (Chile)

A certified Professional Sommelier since 2017, Mario Astudillo is Founding Partner and member of the Board of Directors of ALMAULE, an association that brings together wine producers from Chile's Maule Valley to promote and highlight the País (Criolla) grape variety and the dryland winemaking culture of the Maule Valley in Chile. Mario is also the Sommelier Advisor to the Municipality of San Javier (a commune in the Maule Province), in charge of the wine development plan.

This experience led him to co-author the strategic municipal development plan, "*San Javier, Capital of Heritage Wine.*"

This plan supported San Javier's inclusion in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2025, redefining wine as a

gastronomic element. The Creative Cities Network aims to place creativity and culture at the heart of local development within one of seven creative fields (music, film, design, literature, digital arts, crafts, and gastronomy). Today, San Javier is the only city in Chile to be part of the Creative Cities Network in the field of gastronomy, with the goal of using wine as a central element, understanding it not only as a beverage but as an essential food, a symbol of identity, history, and local heritage. With this, Mario Astudillo has become a sommelier and wine-related cultural manager specialising in public policy and social innovation.



Carlos Moreta (Ecuador)

Carlos Moreta, Best Sommelier of Ecuador 2024, returned to his home country in 2025 after time spent employed the Constance hotel chain in the Seychelles. Moreta came back to Ecuador to reconnect with what truly inspires him: creating experiences that begin with a glass of wine and become lasting memories. Today, in his role as corporate sommelier at Corporación Favorita, Ecuador's largest supermarket chain and wine distributor, he works to strengthen wine culture in the country, focusing on the retail sector and how we can transform each purchase into a discovery, each bottle into a story, and each customer into a taste explorer.



Alma Cabral Arrieta (Argentina)

Alma Cabral Arrieta was crowned Argentina’s Best Sommelier 2025. At an event held in November in Buenos Aires, a new champion was crowned. Originally from Paraguay, she has lived in Argentina for twenty years, where she has built her entire professional career as a sommelier.

Alma’s initial vocation was quite different. When she arrived in Argentina, she was underage and didn’t even drink alcohol. Fresh out of high school, she enrolled at the Argentine Institute of Gastronomy (IAG). But in her second year of that degree (from which she also graduated), she realised that the world of wine appealed to her more than cooking, and she decided to simultaneously study sommellerie at the specialised center CAVE.

After obtaining her certification, she worked in restaurants such as Sucre, Aldo’s, Casa Coupage, La Bourgogne, and Tegui (Buenos Aires) and at Le Suquet-Maison Bras (two Michelin stars) in the south of France.



Vanya Filipovic (Canada)

The accolades lauded on Vanya Filipovic in 2025 aren’t so much as a rise to the podium as much as they are long-overdue recognition for one of Canada’s most thoughtful and quietly influential sommeliers. Winning the inaugural North America’s Best Sommelier Award (part of the World’s Best) has given her world attention, although her work as owner of Vin Dame Jeanne, co-owner of the celebrated Montreal eateries Mon Lapin and Restaurant Vin Papillon she has long championed the idea that a sommelier’s craft is as much about stewardship and storytelling as it is about technical mastery. This year, she and fellow Montreal talent Alex Landry received another major honour when Canada’s 100 Best named them both among the country’s “Best Sommeliers,” a dual recognition that highlights the exceptional calibre of Quebec’s wine community.



Joris Gutierrez Garcia (Canada)

ASI Diploma Gold

Honing his skills at Montreal’s Club Chasse et Pêche, Joris Gutierrez Garcia emerged out of the shadows of Quebec’s sommelier scene to become the latest Quebec resident to win the title of ASI Best Sommelier of the Americas in 2025. Quebec has a long tradition of Americas champions with the likes of Véronique Rivest, Pier-Alexis Souliere, Élyse Lambert and Ghislain Caron preceding Garcia. While the others have figured more prominently entering the competition, Garcia’s ascendancy to the title, was perhaps less expected, but not unjustified as his grace under pressure and natural personality stood out in the finale.



“The rise of new voices, new member countries, and new educational pathways signalled a shift toward a more inclusive and regionally representative future.”



Mark Guillaudeu (USA)

MS, ASI Diploma Gold

2025 marked another significant step forward for Mark Guillaudeu on his quest to become one of the world's best sommeliers. Guillaudeu came to the world's attention in 2023 when he became the first American to reach the semi-finals of the ASI Best Sommelier of the World contest. In 2025, the Eleven Madison Park (New York) sommelier narrowly missed winning the title ASI Best Sommelier of the Americas, as he placed second, a significant achievement in a highly competitive field. With this result, Guillaudeu is poised to be a serious contender for winning the title of world's best at the 2026 ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World in Lisbon, Portugal.



Sandra Fernández (Mexico)

Named Mexico's Sommelier of the Year

Sandra Fernández has been voted Sommelier of the Year for 2025 by the Association of Sommeliers of Mexico, an honour that reflects two decades of extraordinary influence in the food, wine, and spirits industry. Widely considered one of Mexico's most recognised sommeliers, Fernández has set a national benchmark with her long list of certifications.

Her deep wine knowledge seamlessly informs her work in spirits, particularly tequila, where she now leads training for Casa Dragones and teaches an intensive Tequila Proficiency Course. A former Chief Sommelier and Wine Director for Grupo La Europea, Fernández continues to shape public understanding of

Mexico's rich beverage culture. A powerful voice for Mexican wine abroad and a trailblazer of women sommeliers in Latin America.



A Subtle but Significant Shift: Key Sake Initiatives Across the ASI Community

Expanding Touchpoints Across ASI

Over the past year, a series of coordinated initiatives helped bring sake into closer alignment with ASI's educational and event landscape. These activities were not designed to draw conclusions about market impact, but rather to create clear, consistent touchpoints through which sommeliers could encounter the category in an approachable way. At the same time, sake's international presence continued to grow, with exports expanding to more than 80 countries and regions—an environment that naturally supported broader exposure to the category.

Integration into the ASI Tasting Framework

One notable development was the addition of sake to the ASI blind-tasting grid, introduced by ASI as part of its ongoing refinement of evaluative tools. This inclusion provided a shared framework for describing and assessing sake in competitions and training settings, and established a useful reference point for future educational efforts.



Educational Engagement

Throughout the year, sake was incorporated into masterclasses at the ASI Asia & Pacific Contest and Bootcamp 2025, where instructors presented key brewing concepts, style categories, and tasting approaches. Complementing these event-based sessions, JSS carried out a compact Study Tour to Miyagi and Akita, including visits to selected breweries, a koji manufacturer, and a yeast research facility. Although intentionally concise, the combined programme offered multiple avenues—both conceptual and hands-on—for participants to gain familiarity with production and technical elements of the category. We are also delighted to see growing interest in sake within the ASI Family, which has been increasingly evident throughout these engagements.

Looking Ahead to 2026 and Beyond

Taken together, these initiatives reflect a year devoted to building accessible structures: shared evaluative tools, opportunities for guided discovery, and occasions for firsthand observation. Looking ahead, sake-related outreach will continue through participation in Wine Paris 2026 and ProWein 2026, where broader international engagement is expected to further support educational and cultural exchange within the sommelier community.

The Year 2025 in the Africa and Middle East Zone



With Michèle Aström Chantôme,
ASI Vice-President for Africa & Middle East

Of the four ASI geographical zones represented by an ASI vice presidency, Africa & Middle East is the newest. Although it is still young, it shows the promise of continued growth.

The first association in Africa to join ASI was ASMA (Association des Sommeliers du Maroc) in 2012, followed by SASA (South Africa) and ASM (Mauritius) in 2015. SAZ (Zimbabwe) joined ASI in 2020, followed by ASLIB (Lebanon) in 2023 and SOKA (Kenya) in 2025, which entered the ASI College of Postulants.

In 2025, it was a great joy to welcome Kenya thanks to a unanimous vote by national associations from around the world at the General Assembly in Cape Town. However, the year was also marked by disappointment as despite best efforts, the Congolese Association of Sommeliers could not gather all the necessary documents for its application in time. Nigeria faced the same problem. The obvious goodwill and great motivation of Congolese and Nigerian sommeliers working in their own countries and abroad were not enough to overcome all the administrative, legal, and financial obstacles that are unfortunately often encountered in Africa.

In 2025, great hope was born in the Middle East, particularly in the United Arab Emirates. In Dubai, a group of highly determined professional sommeliers will most likely be ready to present the United Arab Emirates Sommelier Guild at the next ASI General Assembly in Taiwan.

Another exciting piece of news: the ASI 1 certification exam, organised in New Zealand, thanks to **Celia Hay**, revealed a young fascinating Iranian woman, **Samira Kakh**. Iran is in the Middle East, and boasts thousands of years of winemaking traditions, but for many reasons the concept of establishing sommelierie in this country remains impossible to imagine, at least for now... and yet!



Morocco

Over the past year, sommellerie in Morocco has continued its quiet but confident ascent, marked by a calendar of events that reflected both growing technical rigour and an expanding curiosity across categories.

The year opened in January with a gin discovery evening, setting the tone for a hands-on, educational approach through product presentations and workshops, followed in April by a whisky discovery evening that deepened spirits knowledge among members. May brought a notable shift toward craftsmanship and production insight with a tea masterclass led by a master blender inside a working facility, while June took members into Casablanca for an immersive tour of Moroccan breweries, combining on-site masterclasses with tastings at the source. July proved to be a pivotal month, highlighted by the successful delivery of ASI Certification Level 1 and the establishment of a partnership with Nicolas Cellars, strengthening both professional standards and industry ties.

The second half of the year carried a celebratory and competitive momentum, culminating in October with the Château Roslane Best Sommelier of Morocco Trophy, a clear signal of the country's growing confidence on the sommelier stage. November closed the year on a more intimate, refined note with a cigar masterclass and curated whisky and cigar pairings. Throughout the year, these milestones were complemented by the association's five "1 sommelier / 1 bottle of wine" dinners, reinforcing the communal, dialogue-driven spirit that continues to define the evolution of Moroccan sommellerie.

"The successful delivery of ASI Certification Level 1 and the establishment of a partnership with Nicolas Cellars, strengthening both professional standards and industry ties."

FEATURE ARTICLE



Best Sommelier of Morocco 2025



“Hosting the ASI General Assembly in Cape Town, notably the first on the Africa continent, was both symbolic and transformative.”



South Africa

The past year marked a defining chapter for South African sommellerie, one shaped by leadership, legacy, and an unmistakable sense of continental momentum.

Hosting the ASI General Assembly in Cape Town, notably the first on the Africa continent, was both symbolic and transformative, firmly positioning South Africa as a beacon of sommellerie on the continent and around the world. On the national stage, the South African Best Sommelier Competition in September 2025 saw **Armand Ridgard** crowned champion, securing the title for two years and underscoring the depth of elite talent in the country.

The year also brought a generational shift in governance, as long-serving president **Spencer Fondaumiere** stepped aside, paving the way for new leadership under **Laurie Cooper**, South Africa's Best Young Sommelier 2019. Supported by a board comprising **Jean-Vincent Ridon, Erica Taylor, Andrew Shelly, and Lennox Nyengera**, the association now looks ahead to an ambitious future, including responsibility for hosting the Contest Best Sommelier of Africa & Middle East 2027 in Cape Town.

Competitive success continued at the Stellenbosch Wine Routes Ubuntu Trophy 2025, where South African sommelier **George Young** achieved the highest individual

score, reinforcing the country's standing at a continental level. Education remained a central pillar throughout the year, with ASI Certification Level 1 delivered in April, the establishment of a training partnership with the Court of Master Sommeliers for annual sessions, and the participation of **Ronan Sayburn** on the jury for South Africa's Best Sommelier 2025. This momentum was further amplified by a strong grassroots teaching dynamic, with structured training and local certifications offered across multiple levels by Sommeliers Academy, WineLab. Africa, and Apeirogon Youth Development Academy, collectively signalling a mature, future-focused ecosystem for sommellerie in South Africa.

2025 South Africa General Assembly in Cape Town





Mauritius

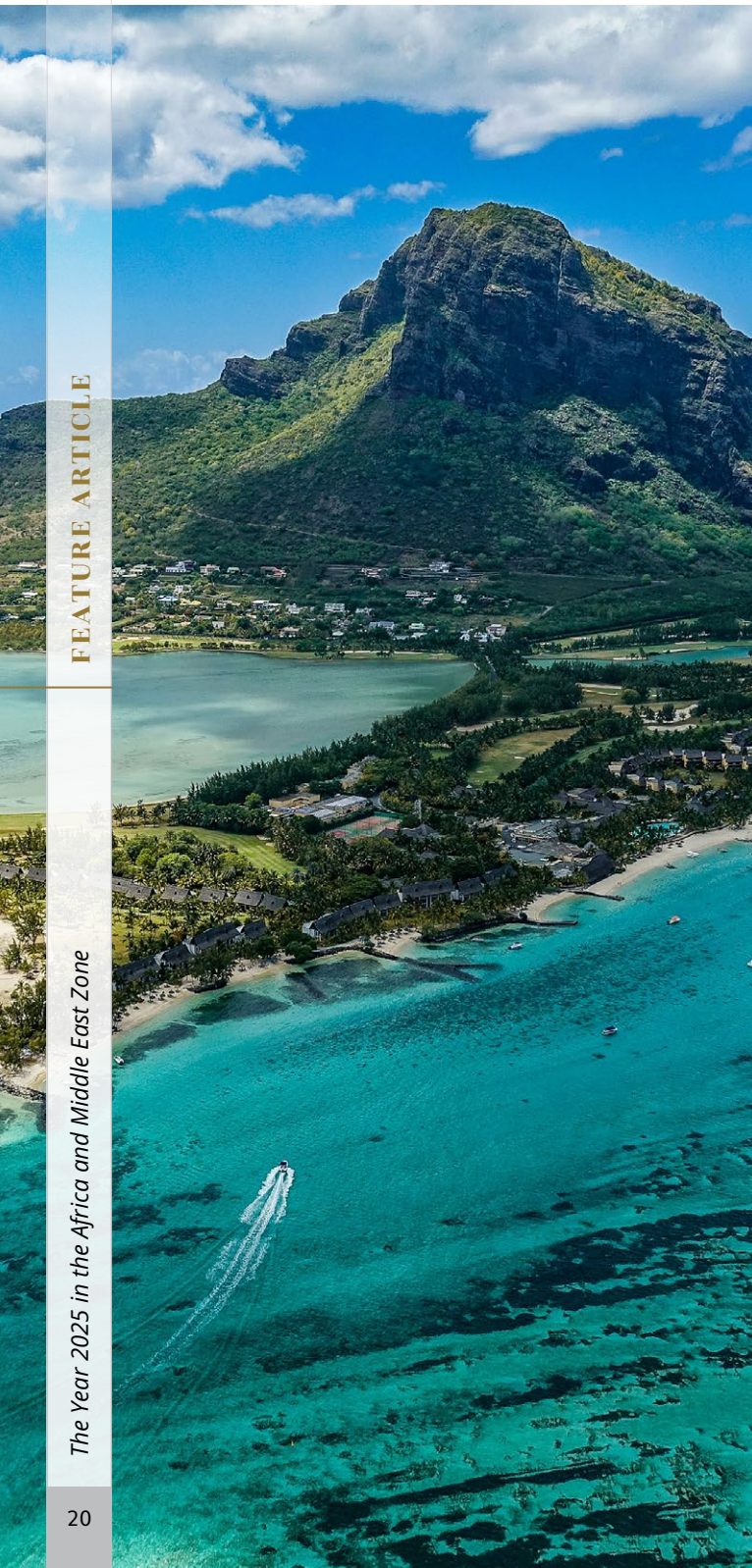
The past year marked an exceptional chapter for the Sommelier Association, defined by world-class encounters, competitive success, and a strong commitment to education.

It began in January with a series of masterclasses featuring some of the wine world's most respected names, including **Domaine Vernay**, **Domaine Jacques Selosse**, **Domaine René Bouvier**, **Domaine Dambrun**, and **Domaine Clos Canarelli** in Corsica, complemented by a memorable dinner hosted with Advini showcasing outstanding wine presentations.

August brought national recognition with the Meilleur Sommelier de Maurice competition, where **Jaisen Pandoo** claimed the title, followed by an elegant Sommelier Gala featuring **Chef Jérôme Bancstel** (three Michelin stars) and an exceptional wine presentation by **David Biraud**.

In October, members travelled to South Africa for a visit to Domaine Creation and a focused masterclass on Vila Fonte wines. The year concluded on a high note in December with Mauritius winning the Ubuntu Trophy for the second consecutive year. Throughout the year, dedicated training sessions on Lychee Takamaka reinforced a culture of continuous learning and pride in local products.

“The year concluded on a high note in December with Mauritius winning the Ubuntu Trophy for the second consecutive year.”





Takura Makadzange congratulated as winner of Best Sommelier of Zimbabwe



Zimbabwe

Over the past year, sommellerie in Zimbabwe has emerged as one of Africa's most encouraging education-led success stories, driven by strong collaboration with the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale and the Gérard Basset Foundation.

The Zimbabwe Sommelier Training Project, supported by both organisations and delivered by Sommeliers Academy, reached a major milestone with 22 candidates successfully completing ASI Certification Level 1.

This achievement followed more than a year of structured training for 30 servers in Harare and Victoria Falls, with women representing an impressive 50 per cent of participants. The impact of this initiative was clearly reflected at the national level, where two newly certified sommeliers advanced to the final of the Best Sommelier of Zimbabwe competition. With the title awarded biennially, **Takura Makadzange** was crowned Best Sommelier of Zimbabwe, building on his earlier recognition as a recipient of the Sommeliers Academy/KLM scholarship to attend the ASI 2024 Bootcamp in Spain.

Education remains firmly at the forefront, reinforced by a new partnership between the Sommeliers Association of Zimbabwe and WineLab.Africa to deliver WSET programmes in Harare. Zimbabwean sommeliers also continued to gain continental exposure through participation in the Ubuntu Trophy, further strengthening the country's presence on Africa's sommelier stage.

“The impact of this initiative was clearly reflected at the national level, where two newly certified sommeliers advanced to the final of the Best Sommelier of Zimbabwe competition.”



Kenya

The past year marked a defining and deeply inspiring moment for Kenyan sommellerie, as Kenya proudly became an official member of the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale at the ASI General Assembly in Cape Town in May 2025.

This milestone was matched by meaningful progress on the ground, with the country hosting its very first ASI Certification Level 1 in both Mombasa and Nairobi, resulting in five newly certified professionals. Kenya's growing confidence was further reflected in the selection of its national team for the Ubuntu Trophy and its participation in the contest.

On the global stage, October 2025 saw Team Kenya compete for a third consecutive year at the World Tasting Championship in Jura, France, organised by La Revue du Vin de France. Additionally, **Jennifer Adero** made history as the first African (outside South Africa) judge at the Veritas Awards; President **Wanjiru Mureithi** represented Kenya at the ASI Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific contest, Wine Vision in Serbia, Cape Wine 2025, and the California Wine Institute's Global Buyers Market in Napa, where she spoke on the Africa panel. Behind the scenes, SOKA focused on governance and systems-building, laying the groundwork for a 2026 boot camp, a Best Sommelier of Kenya competition, and expanded participation at future ASI General Assemblies and global contests.

Together, these achievements signal a young but ambitious sommelier community, increasingly visible, connected, and ready to contribute to the international profession.

“Together, these achievements signal a young but ambitious sommelier community, increasingly visible, connected, and ready to contribute to the international profession.”



Kenyan blind tasting team at the World Tasting Championship organised by Revue de Vin de France in October 2024, at Château Dauzac, Bordeaux



Lebanon

With Joseph Mounayer

In a pivotal moment this past year for wine education in the Middle East, ASLIB (Arab Sommelier & Lifestyle Institute of Beirut) announced a groundbreaking collaboration with Annahar Academy to launch an internationally accredited sommelier education programme beginning in January 2026.

The initiative aims to position Beirut as a regional nucleus for wine education and culture, combining academic rigour with immersive tasting experiences and mentorship from leading international experts. Students will gain hands-on exposure to global best practices while celebrating the region's rich winemaking traditions. The programme represents an ambitious step toward nurturing the next generation of hospitality professionals and elevating the Middle East's presence on the global wine map.

The rise of formal wine education coincides with growing consumer awareness and renewed interest in wines produced across the region. Recently, the Lebanese mountains came alive once again with the Dhour Wine Nights Festival in Dhour Choueir. The event showcased open-air tastings, live music and thoughtful culinary pairings under the stars making it a vivid reflection of Lebanon's enduring wine culture. A highlight of this year's festival was a series of masterclasses led by **Joseph Mounayer** and **Jean-Vincent Ridon**, who guided attendees through engaging tastings while unpacking the stories behind some of Lebanon's most compelling wineries.

Not to be outdone, Vinifest, Lebanon's flagship wine event, continued its evolution as a cornerstone of regional wine appreciation. Thousands of enthusiasts gathered to taste the best of Middle Eastern winemaking. At Vinifest, Mounayer once again took centre stage, hosting four exclusive masterclasses that explored terroir, tasting technique and the artistry defining Lebanon's leading producers.

With Beirut's sommelier education programmes advancing at full steam, a growing festival culture

exemplified by Dhour Wine Nights, and an increasingly competitive sommelier community working in Dubai's top hotels, the Middle East is reclaiming its place in the global wine conversation. Rooted in education, innovation and heritage, the region is not merely catching up, it is carving out a distinctive and confident path of its own in the modern wine world.



ASI Mag Regional Correspondent

Joseph Mounayer (Middle East)

ReadyToWrite





Two African Sommeliers to Watch

FEATURE ARTICLE



George Young (South Africa)

George Young has firmly established himself as one of Africa’s most compelling sommeliers to watch, building momentum with clarity, discipline, and quiet confidence. Named Young Sommelier of the Year in 2024 by the South African Sommeliers Association (SASA), he has continued to translate promise into performance, most notably this year at the Ubuntu Trophy, where he achieved the highest individual score of the competition. This result not only underscored his technical precision and tasting acumen, but also his composure under pressure, an essential quality at the highest levels of the profession. Young’s trajectory reflects a new generation of sommeliers in South Africa: deeply grounded in classical knowledge, yet adaptable, curious, and internationally minded. As continental competitions grow in stature and visibility,

George Young’s consistent excellence positions him as a benchmark for his peers and a name increasingly associated with the future of African sommelierie. Formerly sommelier at Vergenoeg Löw Wine Estate, Young is currently head sommelier at Stellenbosch’s acclaimed Dusk where he collaborates with chef, owners Darren Badenhorst and Callan Austin.



Jihad Errachid (Morocco)

Jihad Errachid has emerged as one of Morocco’s most accomplished and quietly consistent sommeliers, earning second place at the most recent Best Sommelier of Morocco competition for the Château Roslane Trophy, in a closely contested final won by Abdelkrim El Garrai of Le Selman, Marrakech. Currently sommelier at La Sultana, Marrakech, Errachid brings a depth of experience shaped by an international career that includes formative stints in Paris, Bordeaux, and the French Alps, alongside a long and deeply rooted professional history within Morocco itself. This blend of global exposure and local insight is evident in his service style: precise yet intuitive, technically assured while remaining grounded in hospitality. His performance at the national competition confirmed not only his

tasting and theoretical strength, but also his ability to communicate wine with clarity, qualities that will continue to position him as a leading figure in the evolving landscape of Moroccan sommelierie.

The Year 2025 in the Africa and Middle East Zone





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European Sommelier Highlights of 2025



With Piotr Kamecki,
ASI Vice-president
for Europe

Europe's sommelier community entered 2025 with a sense of momentum, cohesion and renewed ambition. This was displayed not only by championship victories, but by the strengthening of professional pathways, cross-border collaboration and a growing cultural influence for sommeliers across the continent.

From the UK to the Nordics, Spain to Central Europe, national associations increasingly aligned their training structures with ASI standards, creating a more unified framework for certification and career development. Regional and subregional contests flourished, offering new stages for emerging talents while reinforcing the collective preparation needed for ASI continental and world contests. At the same time, European sommeliers continued to make headlines in the broader hospitality landscape, shaping conversations around responsible drinking, guest experience and the evolving identity of the profession. The result was a standout year, one that showcased individual excellence while signalling Europe's continuing strength in sommellerie.



Spain's Regional Competitions Expand with Increased ASI Involvement

2025 was marked significant by growth for Spain's sommelier ecosystem with new regional championships in Catalonia, Andalusia, and Basque Country expanding candidate pipelines.

The Spanish Sommelier Union also continue to strengthen its alignment with ASI. Following hosting ASI Bootcamp in Seville in 2024, the Spanish Sommelier Union has adopted ASI standards, adding new structured exams and mentoring pathways for Spanish sommeliers to join in the ASI examination pathway.

Spain also delivered one of Europe's headline sommelier moments when **Mohamed Benabdallah**, head sommelier and restaurant manager at Asador Etxebarri was acknowledged as 'best' by The World's 50 Best Restaurants. The award recognised both technical precision and a deeply guest-centred philosophy, cementing Spain's place among Europe's most dynamic sommelier cultures following recent momentum in Barcelona, San Sebastián, and Madrid.



Europe's Subregional Contest Winners

Europe is seeing the growth of regional, sub-continental contests as member ASI sommelier associations seek to work collectively to prepare their best for continental and world contests.

New to 2025 was the first Iberian Sommelier Contest 2025, which was hosted in Bairrada, Portugal. The inaugural winner was Spanish sommelier **Marta Cortizas**.

Europe's northern countries continued in their long tradition of mutual support highlighted by the Nordic Sommelier Championship and the Vana Tallinn Baltic Sommelier Grand Prix. Norway's **Nikolai Haram Svorte** took first place at the Nordic Sommelier Championship while Lithuanian **Ignatij Semionov** won the Vana Tallinn Baltic Sommelier Grand Prix 2025 held in Vilnius.



A Major Year for ASI Examinations Across Europe

2025 saw a record uptake of the ASI Sommelier Diploma, Certification 1, and Certification 2 exams across Europe. National associations in the UK, Ireland, Nordics, France, Portugal and Central Europe incorporated ASI pathways more deeply into their official training calendars, making 2025 a defining year for credential harmonisation across the continent.

The UK Sommelier Academy confirmed ASI Certification 2 for its national examination structure, with sessions in London and Manchester. This move strengthened the ASI-aligned professional ladder in one of Europe's most important hospitality markets.



Aleksei Pogrebnoi, Ignatij Semionov, Madara Greize-Kapzema and Kevin Lilleht



A Year of Champions

Across Europe, 2025 proved to be a standout year for national sommelier championships, with a new generation of talents rising to prominence alongside seasoned professionals.

In Belgium, **Elizio Masson** claimed the title of Best Sommelier of Belgium, while in the Czech Republic, **Martin Parýzek** secured his third crown at the BOHEMIA SEKT Trophée, underscoring his enduring mastery. Denmark celebrated **Oliver Carr** as its national champion, and Finland awarded its top honour to **Dmitry “Dima” Frolov** of Restaurant Finnjäväl. And in Germany, **Niklas Breithaupt** emerged as the country’s Best Sommelier.

Spain’s 30^o *Campeonato de España de Sumilleres Tierra de Sabor* crowned **Marta Cortizas** of El Celler de Can Roca, while Sweden recognised **Albert Wendesten** as its leading talent. Switzerland honoured **Mikaël Grou** of the iconic *Restaurant de l’Hôtel de Ville de Crissier*, and the United Kingdom celebrated **Maria Boumpa** as its 2025 Sommelier of the Year, rounding out a remarkable year of European excellence.



Wine in Moderation × ASI Partnership Renewed in Brussels

The EU-based organisation Wine in Moderation renewed its partnership with ASI, reinforcing Europe’s leadership in responsible drinking advocacy.

Sommeliers across Europe including Spain, Italy, France and the Nordics, took part in educational activations, integrating moderation messaging into service training. The continued partnership highlights ASI, and its member countries, continued commitment to promote the healthy consumption of alcohol.

“Sommeliers across Europe including Spain, Italy, France and the Nordics, took part in educational activations, integrating moderation messaging into service training.”

Sommeliers in the News



Louis Le Conte (France)

Louis Le Conte emerged in 2025 as one of the brightest young talents in European sommellerie, earning the coveted title of Meilleur Jeune Sommelier de France after an exacting final at Bordeaux's Cité du Vin, this past June. His rise is the result of a steady, quietly determined trajectory that reflects both classical French training and a willingness to test himself in some of the most demanding dining rooms in Europe. A graduate of the Lycée Hôtelier de Chamalières, Le Conte first discovered wine while working in a bistro

in Clermont-Ferrand before refining his technical foundations through an apprenticeship with Maison Pic in Valence, splitting time between the bistro and the three-Michelin-starred flagship under head sommelier Edmond Gasser. That experience, combined with seasonal work in Megève and time spent alongside winemaker Henri Chauvet, gave him both service discipline and a producer's sensitivity. Since April 2024, he has served as sommelier at Pic au Beau-Rivage Palace in Lausanne, where daily exposure to the precision of Anne-Sophie Pic's culinary world has sharpened his palate and instincts. His 2025 competition win, earned against more than 80 candidates and through rigorous tests from blind tasting to Jéroboam service, signals more than early promise: it positions him as a likely contender for future national and European titles.



Maria Boumpa (United Kingdom)

Maria Boumpa achieved a new level of recognition after being crowned UK Sommelier of the Year 2025 a triumph that immediately marked her as one of the United Kingdom's most compelling wine professionals. Since 2021 she has served as Restaurant Manager and Wine Director at the two-Michelin-starred Da Terra, where her deep respect for terroir, fine-tuned service and storytelling-driven wine lists have helped define the restaurant's

sophisticated wine programme. Originally from Metsovo, Greece, she first stumbled into hospitality while studying economics, as a part-time job that revealed an early passion for wine and service. That spark led her to a formative stage at the celebrated Nordic restaurant Kokkeriet, where a 20-course tasting menu, each course paired with wines, broadened her horizons and deepened her curiosity for global wine culture.

In her second ever competition (she was also on the podium in 2024) Boumpa displayed poise, refined technique, and nerves of steel. Through a gruelling series of blind tastings, pairing tests, service challenges she stood out for her precision, calm under pressure and impeccable timing. With her trajectory from a curious economics student in Greece to a top-tier sommelier in London and world class international sommelier, Boumpa embodies a new model of sommelier whose education is rooted in classical training but driven by global ambition, versatility, and a storyteller's love of wine.



Marta Cortizas (Spain)

In 2025 Marta Cortizas became one of Europe's standout sommeliers thanks in part to her victories at two sommelier contests. Her breakthrough came when she was crowned Best Sommelier of Spain 2025 at the *Campeonato de España de Sumilleres Tierra de Sabor*, held during *Salón Gourmets* in Madrid. The competition tested rapid blind tasting, wine and spirits identification, decanting and service, and real-time wine list correction, all disciplines in which Cortizas excelled with calm precision and a refined

sensibility. Originally from Galicia and now representing the *Asociación Catalana de Sumilleres*, she works at the famed *El Celler de Can Roca*, where her artistic background, shaped by earlier interests in fashion and performance, informs an expressive, culturally attuned approach to wine.

Her training reflects both depth and intent: certification from the *Instituto Galego do Viño*, WSET Level 3, and hospitality studies at CETT in Barcelona. She often describes wine as "geography, history and soils," a perspective echoed in her thoughtful service style. That combination of technical discipline and creative perspective helped her secure her second major title of the year: Best Sommelier of Iberia 2025. Winning the inaugural *Campeonato Ibérico de Sumilleres* in Portugal, Cortizas outperformed leading professionals from Spain and Portugal in blind tasting, service challenges and scenario-based tasks designed to mirror the pressure of dining-room reality.

Her achievements mark a significant shift within Spanish and Iberian sommelierie, not least because she becomes one of the few women to have earned Spain's top title. With her rapid rise, polished professionalism, and grounded sense of place, she is widely viewed as a future contender on the international stage.

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Looking Back to a Momentous Year in the Asia & Pacific Region



With Saiko Tamura Soga,
ASI Vice-President Asia & Pacific

2025 was a year of profound momentum across the Asia & Pacific region as it was marked not only by headline competitions and major ASI gatherings, but also by the quiet, determined work of our national associations strengthening the foundations of their local communities. From Australia to India, Hong Kong to Indonesia, the Asia & Pacific region continued to evolve in scope, ambition, and cohesion.

This year was a busy one in Asia as it was full of events including contests, educational events and more. Over the course of the year the best sommeliers of the region continued their exemplary performances, but we also witness new voices emerge both in terms of success at contests but also behind the scenes. In 2025 the collaborative spirit that defines Asia & Pacific sommelierie reached new heights as showcased at our major events such as ASI Bootcamp and the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of ASI & Pacific, as behind every event was a dedicated team of volunteers, educators, judges, coordinators, and partners whose contributions shaped the success of the entire region.



ASI Bootcamp

ASI Bootcamp Asia & Pacific 2025

No explanation is needed to understand the importance of the ASI Bootcamp to the global development of sommellerie. The 2025 edition once again demonstrated the power of structured education to elevate an entire region. Sommeliers from across Asia & Pacific gathered for days of intensive technical training, tasting calibration, service drills, and mentorship from some of the world's leading educators.

Yet what mattered just as much as the curriculum was the community it fostered. Bootcamp continues to serve as a launchpad for emerging talent: an environment where young sommeliers gain confidence, forge international friendships, and develop the mindset needed to compete on the world stage.

This year marked a milestone: for the first time, Singapore hosted an official ASI event. The Sommelier Association of Singapore not only delivered a flawlessly executed programme, but also infused it with warmth, hospitality, and true Singaporean spirit.

What stood out most was their ability to create an atmosphere of connection. Sommeliers from across Asia & Pacific were welcomed not merely as visitors,

but as part of a broader regional family. The event showcased Singapore's organisational strength, but also its generosity along with the readiness of its members to bring people together, spark conversation, and build lasting friendships.

For a first-time host, it was a remarkable achievement, and one that will be remembered as a turning point for the association.



Partners of ASI Bootcamp 2025



ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific 2025

The region's most prestigious competition once again showcased the extraordinary skill and professionalism that have come to define Asia & Pacific. As expected, the calibre of performance was exceptional, the standards uncompromising, and the atmosphere electric with possibility.

But the success of the 2025 contest was also a testament to the teams behind the scenes, as Malaysia continued to strengthen its reputation as one of the region's most reliable and member associations. After successfully hosting the inaugural ASI Bootcamp in Southeast Asia in 2022, the Sommelier Association of Malaysia once again rose to the challenge by hosting the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific 2025.

Their hallmark remains the same: extraordinary teamwork and boundless creativity. The Malaysian team demonstrated not just technical proficiency, but also a clear passion for showcasing hospitality and cultural identity.

Beyond the competition itself, their work exemplified what a committed national association can achieve through collaboration, enthusiasm, and vision.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Looking Back to a Momentous Year in the Asia & Pacific Region



ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific Final Trio
(Photo: Andy Kho)



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



Best Sommelier of India 2025: A Young Association Rising Fast

Few stories this year symbolise the region's growth as vividly as India's.

The Sommeliers Association of India, founded only one year ago, accomplished what many older associations take years to achieve including host its first-ever national competition, having their national champion compete internationally at the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific, and impressively have a membership that exceeded 200 in its inaugural year.

The success of the 2025 Best Sommelier of India competition reflects both the hunger for wine education in the country and the determination of its young leaders.

Sending champion Jai Singh to compete at the international level was an especially meaningful moment. A moment that signalled India's arrival as a promising new force on the world sommelier stage.

“The success of the 2025 Best Sommelier of India competition reflects both the hunger for wine education in the country and the determination of its young leaders.”



Inaugral Best Sommelier of India, Jai Singh



Three Sommeliers Who Defined the Region in 2025

Among the many outstanding professionals shaping Asia & Pacific this year, the three finalists of the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific 2025 represent the diversity, ambition, and evolution of the region.

These three finalists represent more than individual excellence. Together, they tell a story of progress, of expanded diversity, rising new markets, strengthened community networks, and the confidence of a region ready to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the world.

Asia & Pacific is vast with a wealth of cultures, languages, and histories. But I am glad to say in 2025, the region while celebrating its diversity moved forward with a shared sense of direction towards greater professionalism, broader representation, and a deeper commitment to shaping the global future of sommelierie. All of which is exemplified by the three candidates that stood on the podium of the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Looking Back to a Momentous Year in the Asia & Pacific Region



Reeze Choi (China)

Reeze's victory at the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific 2025 was another chapter in a career marked by exceptional discipline and technical mastery. His performance reaffirmed his status as one of the region's most accomplished sommeliers but also highlighted his continued growth as a mentor and representative for Asia & Pacific on the global stage.





Yi Ying Yong (Malaysia, Singapore)

History was made this year when Singapore resident, Malaysian-born Yi Ying Yong became the first female finalist in the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific's history. Her achievement signals a powerful shift, and proof that the profession is becoming more inclusive, diverse, and reflective of the future of hospitality in Asia.

Her presence in the final was both symbolic and substantive but not unexpected as Yi Ying's career has been on a stratospheric trajectory over the past few years. This breakthrough at the continental level will undoubtedly inspire the next generation of women sommeliers across the region, and an indication of Yi Ying Yong's continued ascendancy to becoming a world recognised name of sommellerie.



Ratmir Akhmetov (Kazakhstan)

Ratmir Akhmetov's third place finish in the final of ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific marked a historic moment for Central Asia. The 2022 champion of the Best Sommelier of Kazakhstan contest and an ASI Diploma Gold recipient became the first finalist from Central Asia at this esteemed contest. In doing so he demonstrated that talent and determination can emerge from every corner of the region. His success shines a light on a region with tremendous potential and growing interest in professional beverage education.

“The region while celebrating its diversity moved forward with a shared sense of direction towards greater professionalism, broader representation, and a deeper commitment to shaping the global future of sommellerie.”

An Iranian Woman's Journey into Sommellerie: rediscovering Persian wine culture

With Samira Kakh

FEATURE ARTICLE

An Iranian Woman's Journey into Sommellerie: rediscovering Persian wine culture



Samira Kakh

Samira Kakh was born and raised in Iran, a country where the culture of wine is ancient, complex, and largely unspoken in modern life. Today, she is building a future in wine in New Zealand, having passed her certified course with the Court of Master Sommeliers, working through WSET, and most recently completing ASI Certification 1. In theory, it is unimaginable. On paper, it seems improbable. In conversation, it feels inevitable.

Her story is not one of rebellion, but of continuity. Of curiosity carried quietly across borders. Of recognising something familiar the moment it appears, even if it wasn't poured at the table.

While wine was forbidden during her upbringing, hospitality was anything but absent. "Even though alcohol is prohibited, the Persian table has always been about generosity, beautiful flavours, and connection," she explains.

"My earliest memories are of my mother and grandmother cooking dishes layered with herbs, spices, and textures. Nothing came out of a package. Everything was from the farm and the hillsides."

Food was formative, not ornamental. Her grandparents and great-grandparents were farmers. Pistachios, almonds, pomegranates, sheep, preserved meats, foraging trips into the mountains. "Food was always part of my DNA," she says.

"I was really curious about flavours... I grew up next to my grandparents butchering, preparing meat, harvesting from the farm. My grandfather used to forage for herbs and spices from the mountains. I would play around him but also smell and watch."

That attentiveness, the habit of observing before speaking, remains central to how she tastes today. "It comes naturally to me," she says.

"My earliest memories are of my mother and grandmother cooking dishes layered with herbs, spices, and textures."

"When people smell wines, it brings a lot of memories back to life when I'm doing blind tastings."

Wine itself, however, lived first in the imagination. "Even if modern Iran doesn't openly speak about wine, its history is unavoidable," she says. "The poetry of Hafez, Rumi, and Omar Khayyam is full of wine metaphors. I grew up reciting verses about wine long before I ever saw a bottle."

She pauses before correcting the idea of metaphor. "When I was talking to my father, he would smile and say, 'Well, they're not exactly metaphors.'" Wine, she notes, was never alien. "It was always something romantic... in production, in consumption, in understanding it, in serving it. All of these layers were part of Persian poetry."

Her family carried that memory quietly. Vineyards were referenced not as nostalgia relics of generations past, but as an important part of their agrarian history. "My father and grandparents grew up in a region with vineyards," she explains. "They talked about grape quality, weather, vintage variation. After the revolution, they adapted. Wine wasn't discussed openly, but the refinement around flavour and craftsmanship stayed."

If anything, it re-emerged later, unexpectedly. "My brother and my father now make wine," she says simply. "It's illegal, but they do it. The last time I went to Iran, I tried their wine. It was really good. Super fruity, fresh, high acidity, unoaked, and deep in colour."

Her sense of assessment is never romanticised. It is precise. "From my point of view now, people in Iran know how to make wine, and do it really well. It's just done out of sight."

The idea of wine as a profession arrived much further along. "It happened in New Zealand," she says. "I remember seeing someone do a formal tasting for the first time and thinking, 'Wait... this is a profession?'"

It took a global pandemic for the question to sharpen. During lockdowns, having spent years in academia, she felt the urge to reset. Cooking school came first, then wine appeared through guest lectures by the likes of ASI Diploma Gold recipient Andrea Martinisi (semi-finalist, ASI Best Sommelier of the World Paris 2023) and finally clarity arrived in Master Sommelier Cameron Douglas's wine laboratory at AUT. The moment itself was quiet.

"There was a white wine in the glass," she recalls. "Cameron said, 'Tell me what you smell.' I said, 'Apple.' He said, 'What kind of apple?' I said, 'Granny Smith.' And he said, 'That's exactly what I was looking for.'"

"They care about the environment, about terroir, about the next generation. There is so much support. If you're curious, people want to help."



The Persian table is full of flavours



It was recognition, not revelation. "That's when I realised, I could analyse wine without knowing that I understood wine."

When she asked Douglas how to proceed, his answer was disarmingly short. "You need to do CMS (Court of Master Sommeliers)." That was it. "It was one conversation," she reflects, "but it changed my life."

The path was not effortless. Confidence came in fragments, reinforced by mentors who saw her seriousness before she did. "My greatest mentors are the people who took me seriously when I was doubting myself," she says, naming Jane Skilton MW, Cameron Douglas MS, Franc Moreau MS, and Dorian Guillon MS. "They showed me that

humility, kindness, precision, and hospitality can coexist at the highest level."

Telling her parents, by contrast, was easier than expected. "They became incredibly supportive when they understood the professionalism and respect involved," she says. "They're proud that I'm representing Iran in a field where our presence is almost nonexistent."

Her surname offers its own quiet symmetry. "Kakh translates to 'château,'" she explains. "My family name comes from an area where there was a historical château overlooking vineyards and almond orchards. Working with wine feels like reclaiming a heritage that was interrupted."

When asked about Iran's future as a wine producer, she is realistic without being dismissive. "Not under the current laws," she says. "But culturally, Iran is absolutely capable. Wine is older than politics. Telling that story matters." If it were possible, her vision is clear. "Elegant mountain-grown reds. Wines that show old vines and ancient soils."

For now, her home is New Zealand, whose wine culture resonates unexpectedly with her past. "Winemakers here are artists," she says. "They care about the environment, about terroir, about the next generation. There is so much support. If you're curious, people want to help."

That sense of shared knowledge feels familiar to her. "It's like what I grew up with," she reflects. "Generations passing information down. Just in a different place."

Asked what advice she would offer others who feel constrained by circumstance, her answer is concise. "Start. Even if it feels impossible. Wine is about perspective, culture, and curiosity. You don't need to come from a wine country."

Her longer horizon is intentionally open. "I hope to contribute as a sommelier, educator, and writer," she says. "To help make the wine world more inclusive." And always, she returns to poetry. "I keep a verse from Omar Khayyam with me which keeps me going. It reads 'Drink wine. This is life eternal. This is all that youth will give you. It is the season for wine, roses and drunken friends. Be happy for this moment.'

In many ways, Samira Kakh is not entering a new wine world so much as arriving back to place that has been waiting for her, albeit under the shroud of modern Iranian culture.



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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FEATURE ARTICLE

On Road to the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World 2026 Lisbon

On Road to the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World 2026 Lisbon

With Tiago Paula, Carlos Medeiros and Constança Duarte

There is a certain feeling that takes hold whenever the ASI community begins to look ahead to an ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World contest. Anticipation builds, as the hopes and dreams of sommeliers across the globe prepare for the ultimate challenge of their knowledge and skills. In 2023, Paris hosted an ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World contest that delivered opulence and grandeur that only France could deliver. Looking ahead to Lisbon in 2026, the energy feels a little different. Less grand but true to Portugal, as it stands to be more personal, more evocative, and true to itself.

Portugal has always been a country with a wine culture deeper than headlines tend to acknowledge. A place where history breathes through schist and clay, where family legacies are measured in decades and centuries rather than vintages. A place where winemaking and vineyard cultivation is a family story as much as it is a story of place. It is a place where hospitality isn't reliant on formality but on instinctiveness. Now, as Portugal prepares to welcome the world's best sommeliers, it is ready to show that its quiet confidence has grown into something larger. Portugal has carved out its place in the wine world, and it's a place built on authenticity.

“As Portugal prepares to welcome the world’s best sommeliers, it is ready to show that its quiet confidence has grown into something larger.”

There is no better place to host the contest than Lisbon. A place where there is even a statue honouring a sommelier, **Fernando Ferramentas**, a founding figure of the sommelier profession in Portugal. To understand what this moment means, we spoke with three of the people who have been shaping Lisbon 2026 from its earliest ideas. **Tiago Paula**, President of the *Associação dos Escanções de Portugal* (AEP), speaks with the sort of grounded pride one hears in people who have witnessed and contributed to a community’s evolution firsthand. Alongside him are **Carlos Medeiros** and **Constança Duarte** of Event Concept, whose role is to transform vision into reality, ensuring that the competition reflects both ASI’s standards and the soul of its host country.

For Tiago, the significance of 2026 is impossible to overstate. **Hosting the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World is, in his words, “a historic milestone for Portugal and for the sommelier profession within the country.”** He sees the contest not just as an honour but as the culmination of decades of work to bring Portuguese sommellerie to a place of professionalism, seriousness, and international readiness. What resonates most in our conversation is his sense that Portugal is not simply “hosting” the world; it is stepping into a new phase of its own identity.



He describes Lisbon 2026 as validation of everything that has been built, from educational pathways and restaurant culture to a rising generation of sommeliers who can stand shoulder to shoulder with peers from any nation. But rather than a declaration of arrival, he sees it as a moment of sharing. “A chance to show who Portuguese sommeliers are, how they think, and how they interpret wine through their unique mixture of European precision and the warmth of Portuguese hospitality.”

“Identity is a theme he returns to often. Portuguese sommellerie,” he says, “is not just technically strong, it carries a sensitivity shaped by territory, tradition, and a deep understanding of how wine and hospitality intertwine.” This he hopes will be evident throughout the competition. While the technical level must remain uncompromising,



Tiago Paula (Photo: Alex Chris)

Tiago believes that what truly sets Portugal apart is its ability to welcome with sincerity, to communicate emotion without sacrificing rigour, and to approach wine as both a craft and a cultural expression.

Naturally, the wines of Portugal will play a central role. The plan is not to overwhelm visitors with a parade of flashy moments but to present Portugal’s diversity honestly and intelligently. There will be opportunities to taste the full spectrum of the country’s offerings, from fortified wines with centuries of prestige to emerging terroir-driven expressions that are reshaping the conversation about Portuguese wine. Tiago wants global sommeliers to leave with a deeper sense not only of quality but of authenticity, and of the cultural depth that anchors both the wines and the cuisine.

That leads, inevitably, to the question of legacy. Tiago speaks with clarity here: he wants the contest to serve as a catalyst for young sommeliers, to strengthen the AEP institutionally, and to expand Portugal's international networks in a lasting way. As he says "the impact should stretch far beyond the competition week. It should elevate professional standards, open new horizons for aspiring sommeliers, and position Portuguese wine more firmly within the global dialogue." Ultimately, he hopes that everyone who joins the event in 2026 leaves with an enduring memory of Portugal's generosity and cultural richness, an impression strong enough to draw them back in the years to come.

If Tiago provides the heart, Event Concept provides the architecture. Carlos Medeiros and Constança Duarte speak about Lisbon 2026 not simply as a logistical challenge but as a narrative project. Lisbon, they feel, should not be a backdrop but an active part of the story. Its hills, waterfronts, tiled facades, light, and rhythms should be felt throughout the competition week. From the movement of competitors through the city to the atmosphere created in the venues, the intent is to create an experience that feels unmistakably Portuguese. The choice of venues reflects this philosophy. The Lisbon Coliseum, an iconic performance hall layered with cultural memory, will host the finale. It offers presence, scale, and a stage capable of holding the intensity and drama of the world's most prestigious sommelier contest. The Carlos Lopes Pavilion,

meanwhile, represents another side of Lisbon: modern yet rooted, elegant yet accessible, shaped by its surroundings. These choices are deliberate. Each venue contributes a different note, helping the week unfold like a story with both continuity and surprise.

Even the event's visual identity draws from Lisbon's most recognisable symbol, the Belém Tower, providing a subtle but constant connection to the city's history of exploration and its relationship with the wider world. It is a fitting metaphor for a profession that, in many ways, serves as a cartographer of taste, mapping terroir, culture, and craftsmanship for guests through every bottle opened.

Of course, producing a live finale of this scale is no small feat. Carlos describes the fundamental challenge as "harmonising precision with unpredictability." Anyone who has witnessed an ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World finale understands the choreography of timing which blends technical requirements with theatrical pacing,

"There will be opportunities to taste the full spectrum of the country's offerings, from fortified wines with centuries of prestige to emerging terroir-driven expressions."



Belém Tower

and the ability to adapt in real time. For Event Concept, the goal is to create an environment where competitors feel entirely supported, the audience feels fully engaged, and the tension intrinsic to a world championship is expressed without overshadowing the elegance of the event.

When I ask what success will look like for them, both Carlos and Constança speak in similar terms. They want an event that feels seamless, natural, and emotionally resonant. **One in which Portugal's identity emerges clearly but never overwhelms the universality of the competition. Their hope is that everyone which includes competitors, jury members, partners, and guests leave feeling that they have been part of something both deeply professional and deeply human.**

Collaboration between AEP, Event Concept and ASI has been central, and all three sides emphasise how aligned they have been from the beginning. The shared aim has always been to respect the traditions that define ASI while bringing the contest forward with innovation and Portuguese character. Any refinements along the way were driven by a desire to ensure that operational excellence and cultural storytelling moved in tandem.



Yet there is one aspiration that ties all their viewpoints together. They all hope that Lisbon 2026 will set a benchmark not only for competitive standards but for how the sommelier profession is understood by the world. They want the public to see sommeliers not only as technicians of blind tasting or guardians of service standards but as cultural interpreters, connecting producers and guests through context, emotion, and knowledge. If the contest inspires admiration for the craft and encourages new talent to pursue the profession, they feel they will have achieved something meaningful.

As I reflect on these conversations, I am struck by how aligned they are with the current global moment in sommelierie. Around the world, we are seeing a generation that is technically sharper than ever yet also more attuned to storytelling, cultural identity, and authenticity. Lisbon 2026 arrives at precisely the right time for a country eager to

share its voice and for a profession increasingly aware of the influence it can have.

The road to Portugal is still ahead, but the foundation has already been laid with care and conviction. What awaits in Lisbon is more than a competition. It is an invitation and an opportunity to understand Portugal more deeply and to celebrate the craft of sommeliers at the highest level. The energy is already building, and as the countdown continues, the world of wine can look forward to a contest shaped by excellence, by emotion, and by a sense of place that could only come from Portugal.

Lisbon is ready. And the world is ready to meet it. The ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World 2026 will take place October 11 - 17 2026.

P+S

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Why Moderation Matters

With Nadia Frittella,
Secretary General of Wine in Moderation

As conversations around responsible service take on renewed urgency, Wine in Moderation has emerged as one of the most influential voices guiding how the global wine sector shapes healthier relationships with alcohol. Founded in 2008 as a three-year European initiative, the organisation has since grown into a worldwide reference point for responsible wine communication, education, and professional practice.



Nadia Frittella

ASI's Mark DeWolf sat down with **Nadia Frittella**, Secretary General of Wine in Moderation, to discuss why moderation is not a constraint on hospitality, but a foundation for its long-term sustainability, and why sommeliers are uniquely positioned to lead. While this article comes out in the weeks leading into Dry January, the conversation is meaningful 365 days a year.

ASI: For those unfamiliar, how did Wine in Moderation begin and how has it evolved?

Nadia Frittella (NF): Wine in Moderation started in 2008 as part of a European Alcohol and Health Forum project. It was meant to last three years, but the demand for a structured moderation programme quickly became clear. After those three years, the association was formally established in Brussels, and we've been coordinating the programme ever since.

Today, we operate well beyond Europe. Since 2013, we've been active in South America, and the network continues to expand.

ASI: Why is it important, even essential, for sommeliers to promote responsible consumption?

NF: Sommeliers aren't just serving wine. They're educators, storytellers, cultural ambassadors. When you introduce guests to a wine, you're also shaping their understanding of how it fits into a balanced lifestyle.

We often talk about "balance" in wine as in acidity, tannins, structure. But balance also applies to how wine is enjoyed. Moderation doesn't reduce pleasure; it protects it. Guests look to sommeliers as trusted professionals. When we model responsible behaviour, we make hospitality more sustainable, more accessible, and more respected.



ASI: Some professionals worry that promoting moderation or low/no-alcohol options could reduce revenue. How do you respond to that concern?

NF: It's better to promote moderation than risk losing the sector altogether. Our message isn't "don't drink... it's if you choose to drink, do so wisely."

Everything in life benefits from moderation, and the wine world is no exception. Promoting balanced consumption safeguards the long-term health of our culture, our businesses, and our guests.

"Everything in life benefits from moderation, and the wine world is no exception."

ASI: Is it especially important for hospitality professionals to model moderation themselves?

NF: Absolutely.

Professionals don't just shape how wine is served; they shape how it's perceived. People look at us for cues, not only about tasting, but behaviour. Practising moderation reinforces the idea that wine is meant to be enjoyed intentionally rather than excessively. And in practicing moderation it also protects our own wellbeing.

ASI: Many countries are shifting their health guidelines. How does Wine in Moderation approach the subject of health?

NF: There is no universal standard for drinking guidelines. Each country defines its own. Our role is to provide information grounded in scientific evidence. We work with a network of scientists to ensure our communication is accurate.

Health isn't only physical; mental wellbeing is now widely recognised as part of the health equation. That matters, particularly in hospitality, where stress, long hours, and late nights are common.

ASI: The hospitality industry is known for its intensity. How can employers support healthier consumption habits?

NF: Simple measures can make a big difference. Normalising spit-tasting. Establishing clear guidelines on responsible service. Providing training on stress management and well-being. Creating a supportive team culture where choosing moderation isn't judged.

When professionals feel empowered and supported, moderation becomes part of the routine.

ASI: Has the industry changed since the early 2000s, when post-shift drinking was ingrained in the culture?

NF: Yes, we've come a long way. There's growing awareness of well-being across the sector, and younger generations have a different mindset around balance and lifestyle. That's part of why interest in Wine in Moderation has increased. We are responding to a real need.

ASI: You've recently launched a comprehensive moderation training programme. What does it include?

NF: The course is built around nine modules, covering topics from wine communication to legislative frameworks, wine tourism, wine and health, and best practices for creating a responsible service environment.

We've created targeted learning paths for different professions: sommeliers, oenologists, and others. So students receive content relevant to their roles. Crucially, the scientific components are reviewed by experts to ensure accuracy. We also include real-world scenarios to help professionals navigate difficult situations with confidence.

The training is being adapted linguistically and legally by our national coordinators, so sommeliers in Italy, Spain, Germany, Portugal, and the UK can take it in their own language with localised regulations.

ASI: What's the long-term vision for Wine in Moderation?

NF: To reach everyone along the wine value chain: producers, educators, sommeliers, and marketers. Everyone plays a role in shaping how wine is understood and enjoyed.

Our goal is to provide knowledge, tools, and best practices as widely as possible. We've grown significantly, but there is still so



much potential to reach more countries, more professionals, and more consumers.

ASI: On a personal note, do you drink wine yourself? Has your work influenced the way you drink?

NF: Yes, I do. I'm of Italian origin, so wine has always been part of my family culture. Working with Wine in Moderation hasn't made me stop drinking, but it has made me more aware. I enjoy a glass with dinner, with water alongside it, and I don't drink when I drive. It's simply about making thoughtful choices.

ASI: Any final thoughts for ASI members?

NF: If anyone is interested in our training, all the information is available on our website: www.wineinmoderation.eu

We are here to support sommeliers in making moderation a natural, empowering part of their professional identity.



**WINE OF
MOLDOVA**

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FROM MOLDOVA WITH FIZZ: *add a new spark to your winter holidays*

In recent years, Moldova's sparkling wines are capturing the attention of sommeliers and wine enthusiasts worldwide, combining the richness of tradition with innovative winemaking techniques. Although Moldova is renowned for its still wines, local wineries have heavily invested in sparkling wine production, adopting classic winemaking methods that have propelled these wines onto the international stage.

Sparkling wine production in Moldova began several decades ago, but it has only recently begun to gain significant traction in international markets. Over the last 10 years, exports of sparkling wine have almost doubled in value, reflecting a rising global appreciation for Moldovan craftsmanship. Today, 40 local wineries have invested heavily in both classic and modern production methods, placing an emphasis on quality and attention to detail. The *traditionnelle* method, celebrated for its refinement and elegance, is widely practiced by Moldovan wineries, alongside the Marinotti method, which is preferred for fresher, fruitier wines. Through these techniques, Moldova has broadened its portfolio and earned recognition for the quality and variety of its wines.

By harnessing indigenous grape varieties such as Feteasca Albă, Feteasca Regală, Viorica or Floricica, as well as international varieties like Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon, local winemakers create sparkling wines that stand out with their complex aromas and a balanced acidity, ideal for special occasions. These wines reveal notes of white fruits, delicate floral undertones, and a distinct freshness that became a hallmark of Moldovan sparkling wine.

Moldovan sparkling wines have achieved significant international recognition. In 2024, at the prestigious Effervescents du Monde competition, Moldova secured 27 medals—17 gold and 10 silver—doubling their previous year medal count. Notably, one Moldovan sparkling wine ranked among the Top 10 Best Sparkling Wines globally, underscoring the country's excellence in winemaking. Over the past five years, esteemed Moldovan wineries such as Cricova, Purcari, Vinaria din Vale, Asconi, and Radacini have been recognized among the top 10 sparkling wines at Effervescents du Monde. A standout achievement in 2024 was Radacini's Métier Brut Nature being awarded the prestigious title of World's Best Cabernet at the Concours International des Cabernets in Anse, France.

This accolade further solidifies Moldova's reputation as a producer of high-quality sparkling wines capable of competing on the global stage. Sparkling wines bring a unique elegance and versatility to holiday celebrations, pairing beautifully from appetizers to dessert. This season, elevate your wine list and surprise your guests with the unexpected brilliance of Moldovan sparkling wines—perfect for making any holiday gathering unforgettable.



Sommellerie in a Drink Less, Drink Better World: the 2025 Golden Vines® Report

The 2025 Golden Vines® Report (formerly The Gérard Basset Global Fine Wine Report) once again put a stethoscope to the heart of the fine wine and rare spirit world. Built on the views of more than 830 seasoned professionals including Masters of Wine, Master Sommeliers, and ASI Diploma holders amongst others it offers a remarkably clear view of where our industry is heading in 2026. For sommeliers, it's not just market analysis, it's a directional arrow for how our profession must evolve.

Across both fine wine and rare spirits, the same headline rings out: volumes are softening, value is rising. Almost half of respondents are positive about the fine wine and rare spirit markets in 2026, yet they unanimously acknowledge that consumers are drinking less overall, driven by health concerns, higher prices and shifting lifestyles, especially among younger drinkers.

For sommeliers, this accelerates a long-running shift away from being "order takers" towards being curators of meaning. If guests are going to drink fewer bottles, every glass must justify itself in quality, in narrative, in emotional impact. Premiumisation and the "less but better" mindset favour the sommelier who can connect a guest with a bottle that feels precise, intentional and personal.



“Younger consumers in particular want to participate in the culture of wine and spirits without the same alcohol load.”

FEATURE ARTICLE

This same trend is visible in rare spirits: lower overall consumption, but heightened interest in small-batch, terroir-driven, ultra-premium bottlings. The modern sommelier increasingly needs fluency across both wine and spirits, capable of navigating a guest from a glass of Piedmont Nebbiolo to a dram of single-cask whisky or a mezcal from a specific village, with equal authority.

Health consciousness is no longer a side note, but it is a foundational part of the conversation going forward. A significant share of respondents to the survey highlighted low- and no-alcohol wines and spirits, moderation, and lighter styles as critical growth areas. Younger consumers in particular want to participate in the culture of wine and spirits without the same alcohol load.

This reshapes the sommelier’s toolkit. In 2026, a strong programme will not only feature fine wine and rare spirits, but also premium no and low alcohol wine options with taste of place, no alcohol beer with craft credentials, and lower-ABV cocktails built on quality ingredients. Sommeliers, once wine guides may well need to become ambassadors for responsible enjoyment, aligning

naturally with initiatives like the Gérard Basset Foundation’s educational mission and broader “drink better, not more” narratives.

If there is one megatrend the report frames as “non-negotiable”, it is sustainability. Hundreds of responses to the Golden Vines’ survey placed emphasis on organic viticulture and production, biodiversity, lighter packaging and climate resilience. Equally important is transparency. Younger collectors and connoisseurs don’t just want generic information, they want to know how the vineyards are farmed, how workers are treated, and how wineries and distilleries are specifically adapting to climate change.

This demands a step change in sommelier knowledge. In 2026, a top sommelier needs to become climate-literate. No longer will the traditional attributes of soil, elevation and exposure be enough. True sommelier fluency will also include discussing carbon footprints, regenerative viticulture, sustainable winemaking, all translated to table-side banter.

The recognition of figures like Rosa Kruger and producers such as Corison and Henschke

within the Golden Vines® Awards underlines how closely “fine wine” and “responsible wine” are now entwined, and how sommeliers must reflect a global desire towards sustainable choices in their beverage programmes.

The Report notes ongoing price corrections, oversupply and consolidation, particularly in classic regions such as Bordeaux and Burgundy, alongside strong upside expectations for regions such as Piedmont. While Bordeaux seems to have the most downside



risk Burgundy, Champagne, and California carried both up and downside risk according to respondents, making broad regional predictions difficult.

For sommeliers, this is both challenge and opportunity. Cellar strategy may lean away from a classic regional investment strategy to be a little more tactical and producer focused. Lists can still lean into the classics, but the old days of rinse and repeat ordering may be done. By-the-glass offerings will become essential tools for making benchmark wines accessible in an era of price volatility. In short, the sommelier of 2026 is not just a taster or someone to banter about the details of a wine or a region, but they need to be trend setters and predictors based on a new playbook of wine investment.

The Report tracks the rise of digital platforms, direct-to-consumer channels, online auctions, NFTs and blockchain tools used for provenance and authentication. While it doesn't relegate sommeliers, it suggests that sommeliers will have to expand their stage from tableside to hosts of virtual tastings, be hosts on online educational platforms, and be tech savvy so they can assure clients the provenance of their high value bottles via digital tracking and monitoring.

While the rise of technology and AI will require sommeliers to keep step, somewhat ironically it may push consumers to also crave genuine experiences. A future that speaks particularly well to the relevance of sommeliers now and for the long term as storytelling, and real-life connections sommeliers have with winemakers and distillers will become increasingly appreciated and valued.

Perhaps the most encouraging note for sommellerie is who is shaping this conversation. The Golden Vines® Academy comprises hundreds of highly qualified professionals across 111 countries, with an average of 18 years' experience. Their collective voice suggests a future where sommeliers are more globally connected, more interdisciplinary, and ever more central to how fine wine and rare spirits are understood.

In 2026, success will belong to those sommeliers who embrace less can be more and moderation, champion sustainability and authenticity, read the signals of regional and price shifts, and move fluently between the dining room, the cellar and the digital sphere all while keeping hospitality, not hype, at the core.

“Suggesting a future where sommeliers are more globally connected, and ever more central to how fine wine and rare spirits are understood.”



Member News

Putu Egi Krisnawan Crowned Best of Indonesia

The Indonesia Sommelier Association (ISA) recently held the 2025 Indonesia Best Sommelier (IBS) Competition on October 20 at Fairmont Jakarta. After a series of challenging theoretical, service, and blind tasting assessments, **Putu Egi Krisnawan**, Sommelier at The Apurva Kempinski Bali, emerged as the winner. The event was chaired by Head Judge Gerald Lu and supported by an esteemed panel of past national champions and senior sommeliers from ISA's Jakarta and Bali chapters. This year's competition marked a milestone for ISA, with ten finalists, comprising chapter champions and previous IBS Top 3 finalists, reflecting the rising standard of sommelier professionalism in Indonesia. As a result of his win, Putu Egi Krisnawan will join the national selection pool of past IBS champions to be considered for representation at future ASI Best Sommelier of ASI & Pacific, and the upcoming ASI Best Sommelier of the World Contest, to be held in Lisbon 2026.



Best of the Baltics

The Vana Tallinn Baltic Sommelier Grand Prix once again showcased the exceptional calibre of the region's wine professionals. According to overall winner **Ignatij Semionov**, this year's championship was "dynamic, engaging, and full of unexpected challenges," reflecting both the competition's high standards and the Baltic region's growing ambition. He noted that the curiosity of Baltic sommeliers—unbound by a single regional identity—gives them a broad, nuanced understanding of the global wine world.

Jury chair and President of the Lithuanian Sommelier Association, **Arminas Darasevičius**, emphasised that the contest is designed by former world and European finalists, ensuring tasks that match international championship difficulty. Finalists must excel across demanding theoretical examinations and creative, unpredictable practical tests, making the event a true measure of those capable of standing among the world's best.

Jury member and Liviko sommelier **Urvo Ugandi** added that the competition consistently attracts the strongest talent from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. With experienced sommeliers and rising young professionals competing side by side, the Grand Prix provides a rare opportunity to benchmark skills at the highest level. While the challenges are formidable, the event remains a vital proving ground for Baltic sommeliers seeking to advance on the global stage.

Alma Cabral Arrieta Named Best Sommelier of Argentina 2025

The Argentine Association of Sommeliers (AAS) marked the 10th edition of the Best Sommelier of Argentina competition with a record 47 candidates, underscoring the vitality and rising professionalism of the country's sommelier community. Held from November 1–3, the event showcased Argentina's deep pool of talent and its increasing alignment with global standards.

After a demanding series of theoretical, practical, and service-based evaluations, **Alma Cabral Arrieta** emerged as the Best Sommelier of Argentina 2025, delivering an exceptional performance in a tightly contested final. **Patricio Zárate** and **James Still** rounded out the podium in second and third place.

AAS President **Marcela Rienzo** highlighted the record participation as a sign of the profession's growing prestige. "Having 47 sommeliers compete shows the strength of our community," she said. "Winning this title now places the champion in a highly respected position within the industry." She credits the association's enhanced communication efforts and the momentum generated by the 2022 edition for inspiring many of this year's candidates, particularly younger professionals.

While firmly rooted in Argentina's food and wine culture, the competition demands global expertise. Candidates must demonstrate deep knowledge not only of Argentine wine but of beverages from around the world. "Our tests reflect an international standard, challenging competitors across all beverage categories," Rienzo explained.

This year's format retained the classic elements—blind tastings, cocktail and wine service, food pairing, and commercial tasks—while introducing a new short theoretical exam ahead of the on-stage final. This addition provided further evaluation opportunities and helped mitigate the pressure of performing live.

Rienzo praised the remarkable level displayed by all three finalists, noting that the top scores were separated by the smallest of margins. Alma Cabral Arrieta ultimately prevailed through her precision, calm execution, and unwavering consistency, earning her place among Argentina's most distinguished champions. She also thanked colleagues **Paz Levinson**, **Matías Prezioso**, and **Ricardo Grellet** for their essential support in delivering a seamless event.





Zimbabwe Crowns a New Champion

Zimbabwe celebrates a new national champion with the crowning of **Takura Makadzenge**. Beginning his career as a chef, Takura developed a strong foundation in flavour and gastronomy before becoming one of the country's most influential sommeliers. He made history as the first professional in Zimbabwe to achieve an ASI Certification and later qualified for the ASI Bootcamp in Spain, highlighting how ASI helps nurture future champions in emerging wine markets. Based in Harare, Takura continues to work as a chef and wine professional, organising food and wine pairing events across Zimbabwe and contributing meaningfully to the country's growing food and wine culture.

Consecutive Wins for Mauritius of Ubuntu International Sommelier Trophy



Team Mauritius has once again claimed the Ubuntu International Sommelier Trophy, securing a second consecutive victory at the 2025 edition held on 8 December at the historic Lanzerac Hotel in Stellenbosch. Competing against teams from Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa, the continental final brought together Africa's top sommelier talent following demanding semi-finals that tested skills across wine service, blind tasting, theory, sake and beer identification, menu explanation and pairing challenges. The final round, hosted in partnership with Stellenbosch Wine Routes, further showcased the competitors' versatility with tasks spanning sparkling wine service, still and fortified wines, spirits, water service and beer-and-food pairing, all overseen by an international jury chaired by **Giuseppe Vaccarini**, former ASI Best Sommelier of the World.

Team Mauritius who was represented by **Jaisen Pandoo** and **Shani Ramasawmy**, both former national champions, retained the Ubuntu Trophy, while George Young (South Africa) earned the highest individual score, receiving the Stellenbosch Wine Routes Award. Featuring eight finalists from Mauritius, Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa, the sixth edition of the Ubuntu Trophy reaffirmed its role as a vital platform for showcasing African excellence in sommellerie. The event was organised by Jean-Vincent Ridon.



ASI CONTEST BEST SOMMELIER
OF THE WORLD

OCTOBER 11-17, 2026