

# ASI MAGAZINE

MAY 2026  
SPECIAL EDITION



SHIFTS IN

# Taste



William Wouters



Howard Hsia



Pascaline  
Lepeltier





# A **Sommelier's** Insight

SEASON 3 | EPISODE 9



**Stölzle Lausitz**  
*Born in Fire*

## **BORN IN FIRE: THE STÖLZLE LAUSITZ DIFFERENCE**

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# 04

President's Welcome  
William Wouters, President ASI



# 06

In My Glass  
Mark DeWolf, Editor ASI Magazine



# 10

A Discussion With...  
Howard Hao-Chun Hsia

# 15

Feature Article  
Beyond the Boom

# 19

Feature Article  
Three Taiwanese  
Sommeliers on the Rise

# 24

Feature Article  
India's Upward Trajectory  
of Sommellerie

# 28

Feature Article  
The Present and  
Future of Australia

# 33

Feature Article  
NatChat: Discussing the Evolution  
of a Movement

# 38

Feature Article  
One Step Closer to Lisbon

# 42

Member News



# 45

Industry News

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The rise of sommellerie in Asia, along with changing  
consumption patterns, is leading sommeliers to refine  
their knowledge and service acumen of beverages  
such as tea.

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# Welcome!



**William Wouters,**  
President ASI

## Fostering Change Through Continuity

**A**s I sit down to write this welcome letter for ASI Magazine, I am struck less by the sense of an ending and more by the continuity that defines our organisation. The Association de la Sommellerie Internationale has never been about one presidency, one committee, or one moment in time. It is a community of people, bound by a shared belief in the value of our profession and in the responsibility that we carry as its ambassadors.

When I was elected President in 2020, the world was entering a period of profound uncertainty. Our industry, built on hospitality and human connection, faced unprecedented disruption. Yet in that moment, I witnessed something that continues to define my belief in ASI. That something is resilience. **Not only did we adapt, but we evolved. We embraced new ways of communicating, educating, and supporting one another, often across borders that had suddenly become more difficult to cross.**

Over the past years, our collective efforts have been guided by a simple but ambitious idea: that ASI must be relevant to every sommelier, not just the few who stand on competition stages, but the many who work every day in restaurants, hotels, bars, tasting rooms, and beyond. We have sought to broaden access to education, strengthen



**“Not only did we adapt, but we evolved. We embraced new ways of communicating, educating, and supporting one another.”**

our certification pathways, and create opportunities for growth in both established and emerging markets. Initiatives such as our educational programmes and Bootcamps were never intended as endpoints, but as foundations upon which future generations can continue to build.

We have also worked to ensure that ASI reflects the diversity of the global wine and hospitality community. **Our membership continues to grow, bringing new perspectives and energy into our organisation. With this comes both opportunity and responsibility. We must listen carefully, remain open to new ideas, and ensure that our structures evolve alongside the profession itself.**

*Raimonds Tomsons at BSW 2023 in Paris*

At the same time, we have remained committed to excellence and to our history. Our competitions, including the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World, continue to set a benchmark for the highest level of our craft. But perhaps more importantly, they serve as a source of inspiration and a reminder of what is possible when dedication meets passion.

None of this would have been possible without the support and trust of our member associations, our partners, and the many individuals who give their time and expertise to ASI. **To the Board, the committees, and all those working behind the scenes, I extend my deepest gratitude. Your commitment is the true strength of this organisation.**

As we gather for the General Assembly in Taiwan and look ahead to the year to come, I do so knowing that this will be my final year serving as President of ASI, before handing over the responsibility at the 2027 General Assembly in France. This period of transition is not about conclusion, but about continuity, ensuring that the organisation remains strong, adaptable, and prepared for its next chapter.

Leadership will change, as it should, but the values that underpin our work remain constant. **The next chapter will bring new ideas, new challenges, and new opportunities, and I have no doubt that ASI will continue to grow stronger through them.**

For my part, I look ahead to this final year with a sense of purpose and pride, not for what I have done, but for what we as a global community continue to achieve together. It is with great humility in knowing that our work is never finished. It has been an honour to serve this community, and I remain, as always, one of its most committed supporters.

**Thank you for your trust, your passion, and your belief in what we do.**

**“This period of transition is not about conclusion, but about continuity, ensuring that the organisation remains strong, adaptable, and prepared for its next chapter.”**

*William Wouters speaks at an ASI General Assembly*

# In My Glass



**Mark DeWolf**  
 Mark DeWolf, Content Manager ASI  
 Editor, ASI Magazine  
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## Refining the Framework of *Fine Wine*



In my glass today are wines that even just fifteen years ago I might have dismissed without trying or certainly sipped with a hint of hesitation and mistrust.

I came of age in a wine world defined by certainty. The benchmarks were clear and widely agreed upon. A South Australia Shiraz prized for its bold fruit, pepperiness and eucalyptus hints. They were big, mouth-filling and consistent.

Napa Cabernet Sauvignon spoke with confidence and structure with currant and mint notes mingling seamlessly with rich, ripe tannins and moderate acidity.

Chardonnay, whether from Burgundy or beyond, carried an expectation of shape, texture and intent.

Then came New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, electrifying in its aromatic

clarity with a grocery list of aromas that included grapefruit, passion fruit, freshly mown grass and subtle hints of bell pepper.

These were wines that fit neatly into the grids, exams, typicity charts and, perhaps most importantly, our collective understanding of what quality tasted like.

Authenticity, as I was taught, lived within very defined lines. A wine was true if it reflected its place and grape in a way that aligned with expectation. Precision mattered. Technical correctness mattered. Cleanliness was non-negotiable. If a wine strayed into volatility, reduction, Brett or anything resembling instability, it was not a curiosity, it was a problem. As sommeliers, our role was to protect the guest from those problems.

Then, somewhere around 2010, the ground really began to shift. What was in the 1990s and early 2000s a subculture reserved for the corners of big cities like New York and Paris, became a global phenomenon.

The rise of what came to be called natural wine did not arrive as a gentle evolution. It felt, at times,

**“The noise has quieted, or perhaps I and other sommeliers of my generation have learned how to listen differently.”**



like a rejection. Suddenly, the conversations moved away from what was in the glass to how the wine had been made. Vineyard practices, ambient yeasts, minimal intervention, low or no sulphur. These were not entirely new ideas, but they were being framed as a counterpoint to the very standards many of us had built our careers upon.

I will admit, my early encounters left me sceptical. There were too many glasses confidently placed in front of me by eager young sommeliers, often with a sense of quiet defiance, as if they were offering access to a truth I had somehow missed. And too often, those wines were not convincing. Mousy. Volatile. Unstable.

Vins de Pays made 'naturally' presented with the reverence once reserved for the classics. It was difficult not to feel that the pendulum had swung too far,

**“They may be different  
but they are not defined by  
their difference.”**

that faults were being reframed as features, and that the discipline of the craft was being dismissed in favour of ideology.

For a time, I found myself disillusioned. Not by the idea of farming responsibly or fermenting with intention, but by the erosion of a shared language. If everything could be justified by process, where did that leave the glass itself?

**But something has changed in the last five years. The noise has quieted, or perhaps I and other sommeliers of my generation have learned how to listen differently.**

What has emerged is a clearer distinction between natural wine as an aesthetic and natural wine as a philosophy. The former, at its peak, became a style. Cloudy, edgy, often unpredictable, sometimes compelling, sometimes not. Often relying on a colourful label and Instagram campaign. The latter, however, is something far more enduring. It is a return to farming with respect, to winemaking that seeks to translate rather than transform, to a restraint that is not about doing less for the sake of it, but about doing only what is necessary.



In my glass now, I find wines that carry this philosophy without sacrificing coherence. They may be less polished, but they are not careless. They may be different, but they are not defined by their difference.

As sommeliers, this evolution asks something else. What is typicity? What is authenticity? It asks us to expand our understanding of wine. To recognise that typicity is not fixed, but neither is it irrelevant. To understand that a wine can be both technically sound and expressive in ways that fall outside the classic moulds. And perhaps most importantly, it asks us to recalibrate our relationship with fault. Not to excuse it, but to contextualise it.

I do not believe the role of the sommelier has changed as much as it has been challenged. We are still here to guide, to interpret, to translate. **But the language we use has broadened, and the tasting charts we once embraced no longer defined by hard lines.**

Has this new evolution of 'natural' wine allowed us to embrace the perfections of imperfections and that personality is better than conformity without having to accept faults as stylistic intent or virtue.

In my glass, then, is not just glasses of wine, but a reconciliation. It is a reminder that what once felt like disruption can, over time, become integration. And that the most interesting place to stand is often not at one end of a spectrum, but somewhere in between, where curiosity is balanced by experience.

**In the end, what matters is not whether a wine fits the framework we were taught, but whether we are willing to keep refining that framework, glass by glass.**

*Cheers*



**Frank Cornelissen  
Munjebel Etna  
Rosso Classico DOP**  
(Etna, Italy)

*My first experiences with Cornelissen's wines were a bit wilder, more tannic, but now there is a more focused fruit-forward energy.*



**Niepoort Dialogo  
Branco Douro DOC**  
(Douro, Portugal)

*A wonderfully curious blend of varietals that delivers freshness, earthiness and salinity with a bite.*



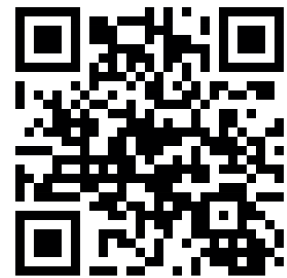
**Remelluri Rioja  
Reserva DOCa**  
(Rioja, Spain)

*From a region known for its oak-aging, this wine seems avoid wood distractions while keeping its Rioja integrity in place. Fruity, herbal, earthy and sumptuous.*

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# Guest Editor

HOWARD HAO-CHUN HSIA



Howard Hao-Chun Hsia

## A New Palate, A Broader Lens: **The Evolution of Sommellerie in Taiwan**

With Howard Hao-Chun Hsia

A DISCUSSION WITH...



The Taipei skyline

**“Taiwan’s sommeliers are building something more fluid, more interdisciplinary, and perhaps more reflective of how people actually eat and drink today.”**

**T**here is a moment in every emerging sommelier culture when imitation gives way to identity. For Taiwan, that moment is not approaching. It is already underway.

ASI recently spoke with **Howard Hao-Chun Hsia**, President of the Taiwan Sommelier Association, one who quickly understands that Taiwan is not attempting to replicate a European model of sommellerie.

Instead, it is expanding the definition. Rooted in classical wine knowledge yet shaped by a broader cultural understanding of flavour, Taiwan’s sommeliers are building something more fluid, more interdisciplinary, and perhaps more reflective of how people actually eat and drink today.

**“We try to be ahead with the trend,” Hsia explains, “but we are still closely observing what the trend is, how the market is changing, we are fast learners. We adapt.”**

Howard Hao-Chun Hsia



Founded in  
**2010**

**76**  
members

That balance, between observation and innovation, sits at the heart of Taiwan's growing influence.

The Taiwan Sommelier Association, founded in 2010, remains intentionally small, with just 76 members. It is a conscious decision.

"We are keeping it very simple, only professional working sommeliers are able to join," Hsia notes. "We keep ourselves small, but we dive deep."

Within that depth lies a strong connection to ASI (Association de la Sommellerie Internationale). Taiwan's engagement with ASI has provided structure, international benchmarking, and a platform for exchange. But the relationship is not one-directional. Taiwan is increasingly contributing its own perspective to the global conversation, particularly as it prepares to host the ASI General Assembly.

"I just want to bring Taiwan to the world and showcase what we have," Hsia says. "Most of our (ASI) member country presidents have not been to Taiwan at all. It would be their first time."



This sense of invitation, of opening a cultural and culinary dialogue, is central to Taiwan's approach. Perhaps the most defining characteristic of Taiwanese sommellerie is its refusal to be confined to wine alone.

"I want to promote the idea that a sommelier is a profession, not limited to knowledge of a single beverage. They can have deep knowledge of wine, but they have to know other beverages as well," Hsia explains. "In the restaurant you design the beverage list, not just the wine list, including beer, spirits and non-alcoholic drinks."

This philosophy reflects Taiwan's broader cultural context, where

beverage knowledge has never been singular. Tea, in particular, plays a foundational role.

"The tea culture is huge in Taiwan, we produce one of the most famous oolong teas," Hsia notes, while acknowledging that much of this expertise has historically remained local rather than globally promoted.

That is beginning to change.

Through the ASI General Assembly in Taiwan, the local association intends not only to showcase its tea heritage, but to formalise it within a sommelier framework. Delegates will receive pre-arrival coursework, visit tea plantations, and complete structured tastings



Chloe Lan was crowned Best Sommelier of Taiwan in a competitive contest held in 2025.

and examinations, an approach that mirrors wine education but introduces a different sensory logic.

"We will visit a tea plantation, taste different types of teas to link up our knowledge and also our senses," Hsia explains. "In the end, if they pass the test, they will receive a government recognised certificate."

The statement is clear. The sommelier of the future may need to think well beyond the grape.

Taiwan's culinary landscape reinforces this evolution. Few regions offer such a dense interplay of influences including Chinese, Japanese, Southeast Asian, and indigenous traditions, combined with a modern, globally informed dining culture. The result is a cuisine that is both deeply rooted and constantly shifting.

For sommeliers, this creates a unique challenge. Classic Western pairing frameworks often rely on singular logic: acidity against fat, tannin against protein. Taiwanese cuisine, by contrast, frequently combines sweetness, umami, spice, and texture within a single dish. It resists simplification.

Hsia sees this complexity as an opportunity.

"We want everyone to have experience in the pairing, especially with our locally produced wines, spirits, and also some sake," he says. "We produce a lot of fruit wines which provide something new, something different from traditional grape-based wine pairings."



Even more striking is the integration of multiple beverage categories within a single pairing progression.

"When we have a pairing dinner in Taiwan, we can have wine but also some sake; what type of water you use, or what type of tea you serve at the end are all part of the experience," Hsia explains. "We really have a very complex and interesting pairing experience."

This diverse approach is one of the elements Hsia is most excited to showcase during the ASI General Assembly. One of the most compelling aspects of Taiwan's culinary identity lies in the relationship between street food and high gastronomy.

"The GA (General Assembly) will definitely showcase local delicacies, local tastes," Hsia says. He encourages visiting sommeliers, to immerse themselves in the culture. He recommends guests to "experience the night market" to enjoy flavours that are both traditional and very authentic.

In Taiwan, as in many parts of the world, fine dining does not exist in a vacuum. It evolves from everyday cooking, from markets, from family traditions. The sommelier, in turn, must be able to navigate both ends of that spectrum, pairing not only structured tasting menus, but also the informal, vibrant flavours of the street.



**"Fine dining does not exist in a vacuum. It evolves from everyday cooking, from markets, from family traditions."**

It's an exciting time for sommellerie in Taiwan. The development of sommellerie in Taiwan over the past 15 years has been rapid.

"At first we only had about five sommeliers," Hsia recalls. "Now we have 76 sommeliers." It's not a huge number but that's intentional as the association focuses on professional, working sommeliers. While Taiwan has its elder sommelier mentors Hsia notes, "there's a lot of young sommeliers on rise. Many of them have already passed their advanced sommelier or received their ASI Diploma. Our national competition is actually quite competitive."

Taiwan has already begun to see representation at the highest levels, including strong performances at international competitions. But what is perhaps more significant is the depth behind those individuals, a pipeline of talent shaped by both global standards and local context.

If Taiwan's sommellerie has a defining theme, it is expansion. This is evident not only in tea and sake, but also in areas rarely emphasised elsewhere. Hsia himself has been a driving force behind the promotion of water as a serious discipline.

"I've been promoting water. We also certified water sommeliers in Taiwan," he explains. "So far we have a hundred or so."

Alongside this, the association has introduced competitions and education in tea and sake, reinforcing the idea that beverage expertise is not singular, but interconnected.

The result is a sommelier who is less defined by category and more by sensory intelligence, an ability to understand how different liquids interact with food, with each other, and with the broader dining experience.

As Taiwan hosts the global sommelier community this month,

the objective is not simply to impress, but to resonate.

"I want this event to be very memorable and also meaningful," Hsia reflects. "When they go back to their country, they can promote tea as well."

It is a modest statement, but one that carries weight. The ambition is not to redefine the profession, but to provide an expansion to it, with new ideas, new perspectives, and new ways of thinking.

For a profession that has long been anchored in tradition, Taiwan offers something quietly transformative; a reminder that sommellerie is not static. It evolves with culture, with cuisine, and with curiosity.

**"The association has introduced competitions and education in tea and sake, reinforcing the idea that beverage expertise is not singular, but interconnected."**



# The Rice Behind Sake: What's Changing in Japan's Fields?



Do you know what kind of rice shapes the flavour of the sake in your glass?

Rice is one of the most important factors determining sake quality. In Japan, rice is broadly classified into table rice, processing rice (used for products such as rice flour and snacks as well as for sake), and sake rice developed specifically for sake brewing. Of the approximately 7 million tons of rice produced annually in Japan, about 3% is used for sake, and only about 1% is sake rice.

## What Makes Sake Rice Different

Compared to table rice, sake rice varieties such as Yamada Nishiki and Gohyakumangoku typically have larger grains, lower protein content, and a distinct opaque core known as shinpaku, where starch granules are more loosely packed. These characteristics allow for better koji growth and improved solubility at low temperatures, contributing to the delicate aromas and refined flavors typical of ginjo-style sake.

Different regions cultivate varieties suited to their climate, influencing regional styles of sake. Efforts to develop new sake rice varieties for regional identity are ongoing, alongside research into heat-resistant strains in response to climate change.

## Rising Prices and Supply Shifts

One of the major challenges facing the sake industry today is the sharp rise in rice prices overall. Traditionally, sake rice has commanded higher prices because it is difficult to grow and has lower yields. However, rising prices for table rice have begun to shift this balance. Some farmers are switching from sake rice to table rice, which is easier to grow and has broader uses. Production of Gohyakumangoku has declined by over 10,000 tons since 2015, with a further drop of about 4,000 tons between 2024 and 2025. In contrast, Yamada Nishiki remains relatively stable, supported by strong demand from breweries and long-standing contract farming systems.

Yamada Nishiki (Sake Rice)



26.5g / 1000 grains

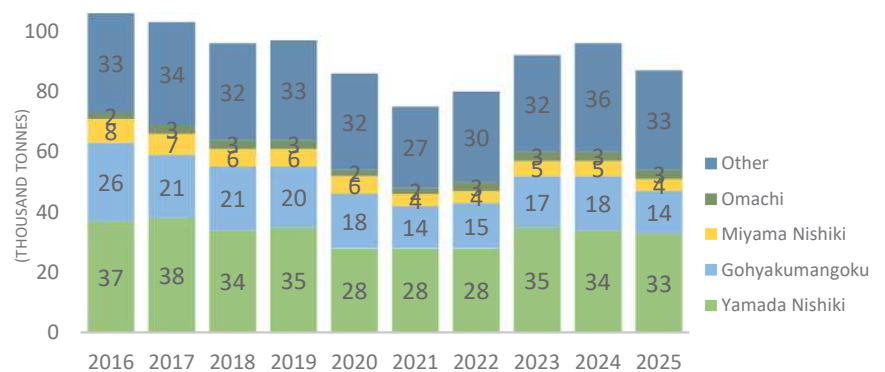
Good for Koji making  
High digestibility, Low protein content

Nipponbare (Table Rice)

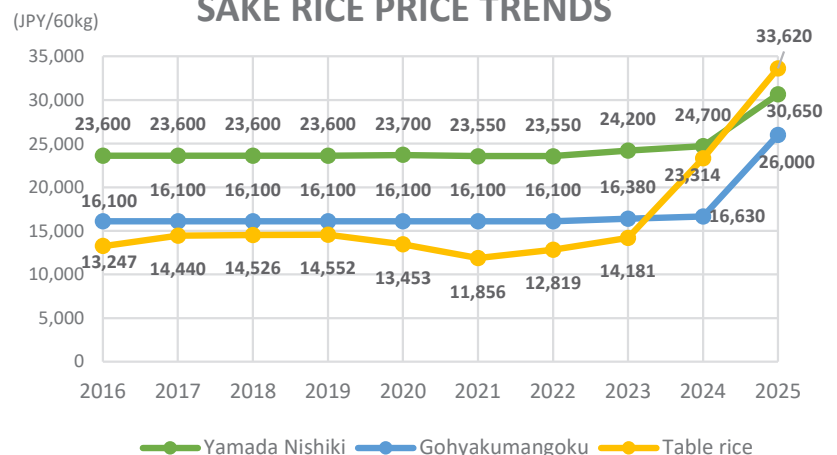


22.3g / 1000 grains

## PRODUCTION TRENDS OF SAKE RICE



## SAKE RICE PRICE TRENDS



Alongside the decline in sake rice supply, sake rice prices have risen sharply, placing a significant additional burden on breweries. Particularly in everyday price ranges, it is not easy to pass rising raw material costs on to consumers. Breweries are responding to these supply and pricing difficulties by adjusting polishing ratios, reevaluating rice varieties, and refining production methods, but conditions remain challenging. As global demand for sake continues to grow, securing a stable supply of high-quality sake rice will be essential for the sustainable development of the sake industry.

# Beyond the Boom: Rethinking East and Southeast Asia's Wine Narrative

For the past two decades, many wine producing regions have spoken about Asia as a singular opportunity. This way of thinking has long been out of date. With upwards of 50 countries, stretching nearly 9,000 kilometres, the region demands a more granular understanding. Thinking about fragmentation is challenging, and time-consuming, but it offers potential to identify how wine fits not within an unrealistically broad understanding of a massive region, but within the specifics of individual cultures. For sommeliers, this shift is critical.

Success increasingly depends on a nuanced understanding of how wine integrates into their local dining, drinking habits, and cultural expectations.

Driving this mindset of Asia as wine's great growth frontier were stories of rising middle classes and seemingly limitless volume potential. Yet the past ten years have reshaped that narrative. The data now points to a more complex reality: Asia is no longer a singular growth engine, but a fragmented, evolving set of markets where value increasingly matters more than volume.

Globally, this shift is already visible. According to the International Organisation of Vine and Wine, wine consumption fell to 214.2 million hectolitres in 2024, down 3.3 per cent year-on-year and the lowest level since 1961. Against that backdrop, Asia has not escaped decline, but its story is less about contraction and more about transformation.

Focusing in specifically on East and Southeast Asia, nowhere is this more evident than in China. Once the defining force behind global wine growth, China's consumption has fallen sharply since its peak in the mid-2010s. OIV data shows consumption dropping to 5.5 million hectolitres in 2024, with a 19 per cent year-on-year decline and a sustained reduction of roughly 2 million hectolitres annually since 2018. Per capita consumption remains just 0.5 litres, among the lowest of any major wine-consuming nation.

**"Across the region, wine's development is also shaped by competition from deeply rooted local beverages."**



FEATURE ARTICLE

Beyond the Boom: Rethinking East and Southeast Asia's Wine Narrative

Yet the headline decline masks a deeper structural shift. Even as volumes fall, the value of imports has shown resilience, with reports indicating significant increases in average import prices and total value. The good news is the Chinese market is no longer defined by rapid expansion driven by gifting and status culture. Instead, it is searching for a new equilibrium, one where wine must compete for relevance within everyday life rather than symbolic occasions.

For sommeliers, this means a pivot away from prestige-driven lists toward wines that can sit comfortably within contemporary Chinese dining and evolving consumer expectations.

If China reflects recalibration, Japan represents stability through premiumisation. Japan consumed approximately 3.1 million hectolitres in 2024, placing it among the world's top 20 markets despite a modest 4 per cent decline year-on-year. Unlike China, where wine has struggled to embed itself culturally, Japan's market is anchored in a mature dining culture.

The emphasis is less on growth and more on consistency and value. Japan remains one of the world's leading wine importers by value, reinforcing its role as a high-quality, high-expectation market rather than a high-volume one. Additionally good news comes in the form of domestic wine consumption. While production remains flat, true domestic wine (made from locally grown grapes) is on the rise, as are the number of producers, which now total close to 500, more than double the number just a decade ago.

Styles produced lean to aromatic and fresh, such as Kosu, and elegant interpretations of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from cool corners such as Hokkaido. This gives sommeliers the ability to focus less on building demand, and more on refining it, and curating precision, balance, and food harmony.

One of the most compelling evolutions, however, is unfolding in South Korea. Here, wine has transitioned from a niche category to a culturally relevant beverage. In 2024, South Korea consumed approximately 5 million cases of wine, valued at near €1 billion, making it the third-largest market in Asia. While per capita consumption remains modest at around 1 litre per adult annually, the trajectory is what matters.

More importantly, Korea exemplifies the shift from status to lifestyle. Wine is increasingly integrated into casual dining, home consumption and social occasions. This is reflected in changing style preferences with fresh white wines, fruit reds, sparkling and rosé gaining ground, challenging the long-standing dominance of full-bodied reds.

**"As the market fragments and becomes more premium in nature their role becomes more central as they curate, contextualise and find wine's place within diverse cultural frameworks."**



The rise of single-person households and globalised food culture has accelerated this change, positioning Korea as a leading indicator of how wine might evolve across East Asia. **For sommeliers, Korea highlights the importance of adaptability with lists that reflect versatility, accessibility and occasion rather than hierarchy.**

Across the region, wine's development is also shaped by competition from deeply rooted local beverages. In China, baijiu remains culturally dominant; in Japan, sake continues to enjoy both domestic and international resurgence; and in Korea, soju retains a powerful everyday presence, especially amongst younger urban drinkers. These categories are not simply competitors; they define the drinking culture into which wine must fit. **The challenge for wine is not substitution, but coexistence, and cultural relevance, an area where sommeliers play a defining role as interpreters between product and culture.**

Alongside the major markets, smaller but highly influential hubs such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan play a critical role in shaping the region's premium segment. While their total consumption volumes are relatively small, their impact on value, education and trade is disproportionate. Hong Kong's with its highly urbanised, affluent, and globally connected population continues to place above its size in terms of premium wine buying.

Singapore, with its concentration of high-end restaurants and international clientele, consistently ranks among the top import markets by value per litre. Taiwan, meanwhile, has developed a sophisticated consumer base supported by an engaged sommelier community and diverse culinary culture. Together, these



markets function as gateways for premium wine, reinforcing Asia's broader shift towards value over volume, and serving as incubators for sommelier-led influence and education.

Further south, Southeast Asia presents a slower but notable upward trajectory. Malaysia has evolved into a small but increasingly sophisticated wine market but one defined by slow growth, premiumisation, and structural constraints rather than explosive expansion.

Markets such as Thailand and Vietnam remain constrained by taxation and regulatory barriers, yet urban consumption is gradually increasing. Growth here is incremental rather than explosive, but it reflects a broader trend. Wine is finding a place within evolving hospitality sectors and middle-class lifestyles. In these markets, sommeliers often act as primary

gatekeepers, shaping consumer understanding and guiding first meaningful interactions with wine.

So what does this all mean for the region? IWSR forecasts the Asian wine market will continue to expand in value terms, but volume growth will remain stagnant or even decrease. For sommeliers, the implication is not diminished relevance, but the opposite. As the market fragments and becomes more premium in nature their role becomes more central as they curate, contextualise and find wine's place within diverse cultural frameworks.

**Asia is no longer a single growth story. It is a mosaic with China searching for stability, Japan refining value, Korea redefining how wine fits into everyday life, Hong Kong and Singapore anchoring the premium market, markets such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand and others offering opportunities.**

## EDUCATION ACTIONS TO BE CARRIED OUT IN 2026

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

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

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



## WINES OF PORTUGAL EDUCATION

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

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

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

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



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# Three Taiwanese Sommeliers on the Rise



**Chloe Lan**  
Head Sommelier,  
Michelin 1-Star Ad Astra

*ASI Diploma Gold, Wine and Spirits Trust Level 3, Court of Master Sommeliers Advanced Sommelier, Sake Service Institute International Sakasho, Best Sommelier of Taiwan 2025*



**Howard Chang**  
Sommelier, Jin Ting Wan,  
Marina Bay Sands, Singapore

*Diploma Gold, WSET Level 3, Court of Master Sommeliers Advanced Sommelier, Best Sommelier of Taiwan 2024, 2023 Sopexa's Asia's Best Sommelier in French Wines*



**Patrick Chiu**  
Head of Wine of Licorne Vignoble  
Society Sommelier

*ASI Diploma Gold, Advanced Sommelier of Court of Master Sommeliers Europe*

**“For many guests, what matters most is not just the wine list, but how we understand and respect the wines they bring.”**

– Chloe Lan

**ASI:** What motivated you to become a sommelier? Was there anyone that provided mentorship that you would like to acknowledge?

**Chloe Lan (CL):** During my college years, I developed a strong passion in beverages, which led me to explore both wine and mixology. While working in the industry, I took the pause brought by the pandemic as an opportunity to turn this interest to a professional pursuit. Throughout my journey of becoming a sommelier, I've been fortunate to encounter many people who have shaped my path.

Among them, I am especially grateful to Sze-Hao Tseng, the owner of Fermented by Tseng.

His generosity, selflessness, and unwavering support have been to my growth. More than that, his dedication to supporting the younger sommelier community has inspired me deeply, and I would not be who I am today without him.

**Howard Chang (HC):** I began my career as a restaurant server, where I discovered how much I enjoyed creating memorable dining experiences for guests. Being able to recommend a wine that enhances a guest's meal, while ensuring it is served in optimal condition and at the appropriate temperature, is incredibly rewarding to me.

I was fortunate to learn under Roberto Duran, now a Master Sommelier, during my time at 67 Pall Mall Singapore. His perseverance and exceptional work ethic have been a constant source of inspiration. Beyond his personal achievements, his dedication to mentoring and developing so many accomplished sommeliers is, to me, far more meaningful than any certification.

**Patrick Chiu (PC):** My motivation came from the pursuit of precision and expression—how a sommelier can translate a wine into an experience. From my early

**“I spent considerable time working closely with chefs, tasting extensively to develop pairings that go beyond tradition.”**

– Howard Chang

training in Europe to competing internationally, I’ve been shaped by mentors who taught me discipline, humility, and respect for both the craft and the guest.

**ASI:** From your perspective how would you describe the current state of sommelierie in Taiwan today? both in terms of guest

expectations and level of the profession?

**CL:** From my perspective, sommelierie in Taiwan are growing rapidly, driven by the expansion of fine dining and luxury hospitality, though I believe it is still in a transitional stage. Guests today are more knowledgeable and open-minded, with higher expectations and not only for wine knowledge, but also for storytelling and the overall experience. Professionally, the level is clearly improving, with more sommeliers pursuing international certification such as ASI Diploma and CMS (Court of Master Sommelier) exams. The next step, however, is to develop a more confident and distinctive Taiwanese voice in sommelierie.

**HC:** The level of sommelierie in Taiwan has risen significantly in recent years. Taiwanese sommeliers are increasingly visible on the international stage, with more professionals reaching the finals or winning major competitions. At the same time, a growing number are earning certifications from organisations such as ASI, WSET, and CMS.

As Taiwan’s fine dining scene continues to evolve, guest



expectations have also become more sophisticated. Diners today are more knowledgeable and open-minded, which challenges sommeliers to deliver both technical precision and engaging, personalised experiences.

**PC:** Taiwan is entering a defining phase. Guests are increasingly sophisticated, and a new generation of sommeliers, with many with international certifications and competition experience, which is raising the overall standard rapidly.

**ASI:** Taiwan sits at a crossroads of cultures. How does that influence way you approach service, pairings, or even the role of a sommelier compared to more traditional wine markets?

**CL:** Compared to markets like Japan or Singapore, Taiwan's wine culture is developing, and many guests remain focused on classic regions such as Burgundy, Bordeaux, or cult wines from Napa.

One distinctive feature is the strong BYO (Bring your own) culture. For many guests, what matters most is not just the wine list, but how we understand and respect the wines they bring. This shifts part of the sommelier's role, from recommending wines to ensuring every bottle is handled with equal care and professionalism.

It also influences how the wine list is built: pricing needs to remain accessible, with a focus on niche labels or boutique producers. This avoids a direct comparison with guests' own bottles while offering something new to explore. Pairing is becoming more diverse as well. With the increase of incorporating elements such as sake or even local millet wine, reflecting a more open and evolving approach to dining in Taiwan.

**HC:** While building wine lists in Taiwan, I often sought out artisanal producers with compelling stories.



Although classic regions like Burgundy and Bordeaux remain important, many guests are eager to explore something new and distinctive styles.

This cultural openness encourages a more adventurous approach to pairing. I spent considerable time working closely with chefs, tasting extensively to develop pairings that go beyond tradition. In Taiwan, guests often expect not just technical correctness, but creativity and a sense of discovery.

**PC:** It allows for a fluid rather than dogmatic approach. As sommeliers in Taiwan, we are not bound by rigid traditions. We interpret wine through the lens of diverse cuisines, especially Asian flavours, focusing on balance, texture, and context.

**ASI:** With the increasing presence of global certifications and local talent, how do you see education shaping the next generation of sommeliers in Taiwan?

**CL:** I believe Taiwan is at an early stage of engaging more actively with international certification and competitions. However, as sommellerie remains a relatively niche profession that requires significant time and financial commitment, the younger generation needs more support and encouragement.

Therefore, education goes beyond formal training; it is also about exploration and access. Opportunities such as tasting, sharing sessions, and international experiences are essential in broadening perspective and shaping how young sommeliers think and approach the profession.

**HC:** Education will play a defining role in shaping the next generation. With greater access to structured certifications and global knowledge, the technical foundation of Taiwanese sommeliers will continue to strengthen. At the same time, advancements in technology and AI have made information more accessible than ever. This allows young sommeliers to learn more efficiently, but it also places greater importance on developing practical skills, critical thinking, and personal style beyond theoretical knowledge.

For example, Howard Hsia, the president of TSA, collaborated with the government to provide young sommeliers the opportunity to observe the upcoming ASI Best Sommelier of the World contest in Lisbon, Portugal this year in person.

This kind of education will play a key role in strengthening the next generation of sommeliers in Taiwan and enhancing their international competitiveness.

**PC:** Education is becoming more globally aligned. With ASI and CMS frameworks, combined with strong local mentorship, the next generation will be more structured, confident, and competitive on a global level.

**ASI:** When you think about the next 5 to 10 years, what excites you most about the future of sommellerie in Taiwan?

**CL:** What excites me most is the growing international competitiveness and diversity of sommellerie in Taiwan.

Many young sommeliers today bring fresh and unconventional ideas. I see myself as part of this generation. Many of us come to this profession with pure passion, without being confined by traditional frameworks. This allows us to experiment freely, whether it's pairing Vintage Port with Taiwanese barbecue during the Mid-Autumn Festival, or exploring other pairings that go beyond classic boundaries.

At the same time, the professional growth is very clear. When I passed the CMS Advanced sommelier last year, there were only five CMS Advanced in Taiwan (including Kevin Lu MS). This year, nearly ten candidates are preparing for the Advanced level, and the number of Certified sommeliers has grown from fewer than twenty few years ago to close to fifty today. With this momentum, I believe that in the next 5 to 10 years, Taiwan will take a meaningful step forward on the global stage.

**HC:** As Taiwan's food and beverage scene continues to grow, we can expect an increasing number of new and ambitious restaurant concepts. With this expansion comes a greater demand for skilled sommeliers. What excites me most is the opportunity for the profession to evolve alongside the industry,

becoming more dynamic, diverse, and influential in shaping the overall dining experience.

**PC:** What excites me most is Taiwan's growing presence on the international stage. After winning Best Sommelier of Taiwan and placing 4<sup>th</sup> in the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of Asia & Pacific, I see strong momentum for sommellerie here. Taiwan is no longer following but is beginning to define its own identity.

**ASI:** Where do you see yourself in 5 or 10 years?

**CL:** In the next 5 to 10 years, I see myself growing into a group-level beverage director role, while continuing to work towards the Master Sommelier Diploma. I also hope to be actively involved in international competitions, representing Taiwan on a global stage and continuously pushing my own limits.

Beyond personal achievement, I would like to contribute to the development of sommellerie in Taiwan, whether through mentoring, education, or helping to shape a more distinctive and modern identity in the industry.

**HC:** In the next 5 to 10 years, I hope to bring the knowledge

and experience I have gained overseas back to Taiwan. My goal is to mentor and develop the next generation of Taiwanese sommeliers, contributing to the continued elevation of the profession in Taiwan.

**PC:** I aim to continue competing at the highest level while contributing to the development of sommellerie in Taiwan, as both a competitor and a mentor to others.

**“What excites me most is Taiwan’s growing presence on the international stage, we are no longer following but rather beginning to define our own identity.”**

– Patrick Chiu



Challenging the boundaries  
of sophistication.



# India's Upward Trajectory of Sommellerie

FEATURE ARTICLE

India has long been described as a sleeping giant in the world of wine. That framing feels increasingly outdated. What is unfolding today is not a market waiting to be awakened, but one that is already on an upward trajectory, driven by a young population, rising disposable income, more moderate views on alcohol consumption and a growing curiosity about wine and hospitality.

In a recent conversation, ASI spoke with **Amrita Singh**, President and Co Founder of the Sommelier Association of India. Her story, and the story of the association itself, offers a compelling lens into how quickly things can change when energy, structure and international collaboration come together at the right moment.

The origins of the association are, in many ways, telling. At the ASI World Championship in Paris in 2023, Amrita found herself asking a simple question. Who is the best sommelier of India. The answer, or rather the absence of one, revealed a gap that felt increasingly difficult to justify.

"I said (to myself), we have 1.4 billion people. We're the largest, but we are also the youngest, population. How come we are not represented yet?"

What followed was not a tentative exploration but a focused build. Working alongside Mattia Antonio Cianca and Salvatore Castano, both familiar names within ASI, and supported by Vinod Abrol on the operational and compliance side, the team set about creating something that had never existed in India before. A non-profit association aligned with ASI standards, built within a regulatory environment that is anything but simple.

From early 2023 to January 2024, the Sommelier Association of India took shape. By February of that year it was formally accepted into ASI at the General Assembly in Monaco.

"We worked very closely to actually create what was required as an association because India never had a not-for-profit sommelier association."



Amrita Singh

India's Upward Trajectory of Sommellerie

**“The opportunity lies in shaping a culture that is still being defined. The challenge lies in education. Not simply in the technical sense, but in explaining what a sommelier is and what the role represents.”**

For a country of that scale, it was a significant step forward, but only the beginning.

What has followed is, by any measure, impressive.

**“We have now over 200 members, approximately 110 sommelier members and the rest are business professionals and enthusiasts.”**

That number, while modest in global terms, reflects something more important than scale. It reflects intent. It reflects momentum.

The structure has been deliberate. Membership, education and competition. The three pillars that underpin ASI globally are now active in India. The country has already hosted its first ASI Diploma and Certification Level 1 exams, with a full calendar now in place. The first Best Sommelier of India competition has taken place, with the winner, Jai Singh, already representing the country internationally.

If the numbers tell one part of the story, the broader context tells another. India is now the third largest alcohol market in the world, yet according to Singh wine accounts for only around one percent of consumption. For some that figure alone would suggest limitation, but others, like Singh seek it as potential growth.

“Wine is just one per cent market share now, but in the next 5 to 7 years it is going at almost 17 per cent CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate), which is the highest growth category.”

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



The drivers are not difficult to identify. India is young. The average age sits around 27. Disposable income is rising. Exposure is accelerating through technology and increased travel outside the country.

**According to Singh, “it’s a very young, dynamic, evolving population – the entire middle and upper middle classes are on the rise.”**

A generation that did not grow up with wine at the table is now discovering it on its own terms. That absence of tradition, often

seen as a limitation, is in many ways an advantage.

**“I think the most important thing is that there are no rules. So today when people are experimenting, they’re not going by rules, they’re just going by what tastes better for them.”**

From a sommelier’s perspective, this creates both opportunity and challenge. The opportunity lies in shaping a culture that is still being defined. The challenge lies in education. Not simply in the technical sense, but in explaining

**“Today when people are experimenting, they’re not going by rules, they’re just going by what tastes better for them.”**

what a sommelier is and what the role represents.

"The entire culture of being a sommelier, even though most people are still unclear on what we do, still has a long way to go."

That remains one of the most immediate barriers. Outside the industry, the distinction between a sommelier, a waiter and a bartender is not always clear. Even within the industry, the profession is still finding its footing. Hospitality is growing, but it has not yet reached the point where families actively encourage their children to pursue a career in sommellerie.

And yet, the interest is there. Hospitality schools are producing students who are eager to specialise.

Professionals are seeking certification. Enthusiasts are engaging with wine in ways that go beyond casual consumption.

"Education is very important, people want to achieve those targets, they want to pass those exams, they want to have those pins."

This is where ASI's framework becomes particularly relevant. The ability to provide structured, globally recognised pathways through Certification, Diploma and competition offers something that can scale beyond major urban centres. It provides a language and a standard that can be understood across a country as vast and diverse as India.

There is also a practical dimension. Cost matters. Accessibility matters. The association is actively working to ensure that entry into ASI programmes remains within reach.

I think ASI is already competent, the entry price point is almost negligible if you compare with world standards."

Perhaps one of the more telling indicators of progress came through the first national competition. Fourteen candidates, half based in India and half working internationally across markets such as Italy, Dubai, Singapore and beyond. Indian sommeliers returning, or at least reconnecting, to compete under their national banner.

FEATURE ARTICLE

India's Upward Trajectory of Sommellerie



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# The Present and Future of Australia

A conversation with Jane Lopes



Jane Lopes

There comes a moment in many wine careers when a trajectory quietly shifts. For **Jane Lopes**, it was a bottle of 1983 Chevalier-Montrachet. But what followed was less a singular revelation than the realisation that wine could exist at the intersection of intellect, sensory experience and human connection.

Born in Napa, California, Lopes' path into wine was far from linear. A graduate of the University of Chicago in Renaissance literature, she initially set out for an academic career before a year in wine retail altered her direction.

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Present and Future of Australia

That turning point led her to some of the most influential establishments in the United States, including The Catbird Seat, where she was opening Beverage Director, and Eleven Madison Park, where she was part of the team during its rise to number one on The World's 50 Best Restaurants.

Her journey later took her to Australia, where she led the beverage programme at Attica, widely regarded as one of the country's most important restaurants. In 2018, she passed the Master Sommelier exam, becoming the only woman in Australia at the time to hold the title. It is a milestone that highlights both her technical precision and her broader influence on how wine is communicated.

Alongside her work in hospitality, her writing and perspective have appeared in publications such as *The New York Times*, *Wine Enthusiast* and *Imbibe*. She is also the author of several books, including *Vignette: Stories of Life & Wine* and, particularly relevant to this discussion, *How to Drink Australian*, co-written with her husband Jonathan Ross, also a Master Sommelier.

This intersection of academic curiosity, restaurant experience and international perspective now shapes how she interprets Australian wine. She does not see it as a single narrative, but as a complex and constantly evolving story. What emerges from our conversation is less a repositioning than a recalibration: Australia is no longer seen as "sunshine in a bottle", but as one of the most dynamic and nuanced wine cultures in the world.

**ASI:** Australia experienced significant global momentum in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Did the strength of that unified narrative also contribute to its later challenges?

**Jane Lopes (JL):** There isn't a single cause. Marketing played a role, particularly through campaigns that simplified Australia into something cheerful but reductive, which did not help its image as a producer of fine wine. But external factors were more decisive: the global financial crisis, a strong Australian dollar and shifting market dynamics. In the United States, for example, Australian wine prices effectively doubled overnight, pushing many producers out and leaving the market dominated by large brands.

What followed was not a decline in quality, but a narrowing of perception. Australia became synonymous with a few styles and producers, masking the country's true diversity.

**ASI:** Does Australia need to redefine its image today?

**JL:** Not necessarily, and certainly not collectively. For younger consumers, there is often no fixed perception to dismantle. Rather, there is a lack of knowledge.

**"The most compelling wine countries are those that do not define themselves too rigidly, but allow room to evolve."**

FEATURE ARTICLE



The Present and Future of Australia

That creates an opportunity. Instead of rebuilding “Brand Australia”, the more compelling path lies in fragmentation: a Burgundy-like understanding rooted in place, producer and nuance. The challenge is communicating that complexity without losing accessibility.

**ASI:** Australia established itself through Shiraz and Chardonnay. Is there a risk in relying too heavily on a single identity?

**JL:** Absolutely. These models can be commercially effective, but they often limit a country’s ability to move upmarket. They provide clarity, but at the expense of depth.

The current direction appears more cautious. Rather than focusing on a single grape or style, producers are increasingly concerned with site expression and suitability — asking not what sells, but what works.

**ASI:** How does that translate in the vineyard?

**JL:** One of the most striking developments is the embrace of varietal diversity, not as a trend but as a response to site. Producers are experimenting with Nebbiolo, Fiano and Nero d’Avola, not to follow fashion, but to better match grape to environment.

This makes Australia one of the most stylistically diverse wine countries in the world. It complicates the narrative, certainly, but aligns with a vision of wine based on precision rather than generalisation.

**ASI:** Does volume still matter, or is the focus shifting toward value and perception?

**JL:** Both. Australia remains a major producer with players of all sizes. But there is a growing awareness that credibility at the high end elevates the entire category.

Many premium producers could sell all their wine domestically, yet choose to export, sometimes at lower margins, in order to reshape global perception. It’s a long-term strategy.

**ASI:** Are domestic consumers playing a larger role?

**JL:** They have to. The domestic market is relatively small, but increasingly crucial. There is a push to encourage Australians to better support their own wines, particularly at the premium level.

Interestingly, some resistance mirrors what we see elsewhere: wine lists often remain dominated by Europe, relegating Australian wines to a few iconic references. That requires both education and visibility.

**ASI:** What is actually driving international acceptance?

**JL:** People such as sommeliers, retailers and buyers willing to put Australian wines in front of consumers.

When that happens, the reaction is often immediate. These wines offer

**“Australia is no longer seen as “sunshine in a bottle”, but as one of the most dynamic and nuanced wine cultures in the world.”**

*D’Arenberg’s cube winery design is a symbol of modern Australian winemaking ingenuity*





strong value, especially in categories like Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, where global benchmarks have become very expensive. The barrier is not quality, but familiarity.

**“It’s a shift from simplification to complexity, from volume to value, from uniformity to nuance.”**

**ASI:** Has stylistic evolution helped overcome older perceptions?

**JL:** Definitely. The image of powerful, high-alcohol wines still lingers, but it no longer reflects reality.

Today, Australian wines often align with global preferences: freshness, balance,

moderate alcohol and precision. The paradox is that many consumers are not yet aware of this shift.

**ASI:** Where is Australia innovating beyond traditional styles?

**JL:** On several fronts. Non-alcoholic wines, for example, where some of the best examples are coming from Australia. Packaging as well, with thoughtful formats that preserve quality while broadening access. What’s remarkable is that these innovations do not dilute wine culture — they expand it.

**ASI:** Looking ahead, which regions or styles best embody “Australia 2.0”?

**JL:** Two stand out: Grenache and Chardonnay.

Grenache is undergoing a real renaissance, with fresher, more aromatic and nuanced expressions. Chardonnay, meanwhile, shows remarkable consistency across many regions, from Tasmania to Margaret River.

More broadly, Australia now approaches every style with intention, precision and a strong sense of place.

**ASI:** So what is “Australia 2.0”?

**JL:** It’s not a slogan. It’s a shift from simplification to complexity, from volume to value, from uniformity to nuance.

And above all, it’s a reminder: the most compelling wine countries are those that do not define themselves too rigidly, but allow room to evolve.



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# Nat Chat

## Discussing the Evolution of a Movement



**Pascaline Lepeltier**  
MS & MOF



**Joseph DiGrigoli**



**Claudia Rosselini**

What began as a quiet correction within the vineyard has, over the past quarter century, evolved into one of the most consequential, and at times polarising, shifts in modern wine culture. The so-called 'natural wine movement' did not emerge from a vacuum, nor was it born of a single ideology.

It was, as much as anything, a reaction to the industrialisation, the homogenisation, that crept into the wine world in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. There was a growing sense that something essential had been lost in the pursuit of technical perfection.

For sommeliers, this shift was not theoretical. It unfolded in real time, on wine lists, across dining rooms, and in conversations with guests who were increasingly curious not just about what they were drinking, but how, and why, it was made. In many ways, sommeliers became the translators of this movement, helping to frame its language and communicate its intent. But they were also, at times, participants in its excesses.

Through conversations with **Pascaline Lepeltier MS** (Meilleur Ouvrier de France en Sommelierie, Best French Sommelier 2018, 4<sup>th</sup> place ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World 2023, co-owner,

Chambers, New York City), **Joseph DiGrigoli** (Wine Director, Kitchen Istanbul in San Francisco), and **Claudia Rosselini** (Wine Director, Bavel, Los Angeles), a more layered picture emerges. **It's a picture that acknowledges both the essential role sommeliers played in reshaping wine culture, and the moments where the profession itself blurred the lines between philosophy and style, between authenticity and acceptance.**

Lepeltier's perspective begins, quite literally, in the vineyard. Long before natural wine became a global talking point, she encountered it as part of a lived experience in the Loire Valley,

**"When you start to recognise something it makes you belong to a community."**

– Pascaline Lepeltier

where questions of farming and intervention were already being explored with seriousness and intent.

“When I decided to go into wine, I was already spending some time in vineyards around Angers, which was and is considered a hotbed for low intervention wine. So, it was something I encountered very early on, both wine-wise and getting to know the people behind the wine,” she explains.

This is an important distinction. Natural wine, as it is often discussed today, can feel like a contemporary movement, but its roots are older and more practical. In regions like the Loire, the shift toward organic and biodynamic farming, and toward reducing inputs in the cellar, was not about branding, it was about responding to the conditions of the time.

“When I arrived, there were already a few people producers making wine without anything, in a low intervention way, and it (broader natural wine movement in the Loire) happened as a reaction to where the state of the wine was in the late 80s, early 1990s,” Lepeltier says.

That reaction was shaped by a growing discomfort by many with the direction wine had taken. In many parts of the world, particularly outside Europe, winemaking had become increasingly technical. Precision was prized. Consistency was paramount. The vineyard, in some respects, had been



Bavel restaurant interior (Photo: Joseph Weaver)

subordinated to the cellar. Even in the Loire, one of the hearts of the natural wine movement, it was spurred by a reaction to the marked rise in chemical use in the vineyards and sulphur additions in winemaking in the 1980s and 1990s. In the Loire vigneron, particularly those in sweet wine appellations, perhaps relied too much on inputs such as sulphur additions to ensure the viability and stability of their wines.

When Lepeltier arrived in New York in 2009, she encountered a market still largely defined by those values. Natural wine existed, but only at the margins, and certainly few examples outside of Coturri in Sonoma.

“You had some very famous restaurants or wine bars, but they were the exception, you had to hunt them,” she recalls.

At that moment, the role of the sommelier became critical. If natural wine was to move beyond niche curiosity, it needed advocates. It needed people like Lepeltier willing to take risks on unfamiliar producers, to explain unconventional flavours, and to reframe expectations around quality.

In the United States, that process unfolded over roughly a decade. DiGrigoli describes it as a kind of insurgency, a pushback against the dominant paradigm.

**“What people are looking for are things that are farmed thoughtfully, but taste clean and vibrant.”**

– Joseph DiGrigoli

“From maybe 2008 to 2018 this insurgency came in to sort of explode the hegemony of industrial wine,” he says.

For many sommeliers, this was not simply about rejecting one style in favour of another. It was about expanding the conversation. Natural wine introduced new criteria for evaluation: farming practices, fermentation choices, environmental impact. It challenged the idea that consistency equated to quality, and it opened the door to a broader range of expressions.

Claudia Rosselini, who came into the profession slightly later, experienced this shift from a different angle. Her early training was rooted in classical wine lists that dominated North America in the 2000s and early 2010s. These lists were structured, hierarchical, and brand driven. Natural wine, when it appeared, was initially peripheral.

“My initial experience was more the traditional classical lists, the natural wine movement didn’t really happen until later on,” she explains.

But as the movement gained traction, its influence became harder to ignore. For a new generation of sommeliers, it offered a different way of thinking about wine. Wine was no longer simply a product defined by appellation and prestige, but as something more personal and more immediate.

“We’re focusing on producers that give a damn about the environment, that really want their wines to speak of their place,” Rosselini says.

That shift, from brand to producer, from uniformity to individuality, was one of the movement’s most significant contributions. It brought attention to smaller growers, many of whom would have struggled to find a market in the previous paradigm. It also resonated with younger consumers, who were

increasingly interested in authenticity, sustainability, and story.

However, success also came with complication.

As natural wine moved from the margins towards the mainstream, its meaning began to shift. What had started as a philosophy rooted in farming and minimal intervention gradually became, in some contexts, an identifiable style. Call it the Instagram effect.

Natural became associated for some with certain sensory markers including turbidity, volatility, and a melange of “funk” (mousiness, Brettanomyces). And unfortunately for many these became the calling cards of authenticity. Add in new emerging styles such as orange wines, and their own set of new senses and the narrative was becoming as cloudy as many of the wines.

Rosselini does not hesitate to acknowledge that, at a certain point, the movement veered into excess.

“I feel like we went a little bit too extreme – wines that were either volatile or ‘bretty’ – often tasting like those flaws and nothing else,” she says.

DiGrigoli offers a similar assessment, suggesting that difference itself became the defining feature.

“The consumer base was hungry for something different, and people were maybe not as scrupulous provided that they had that difference,” he notes

For sommeliers, this period raises uncomfortable questions. In the enthusiasm to champion a new way of thinking about wine, did the profession lose sight of its responsibility to the guest? Did the desire to be at the forefront of a

movement lead to a willingness to excuse flaws that would previously have been rejected? Were we mesmerised by ‘natural’ wines with front labels boasting street art aesthetics, and forgot to being more critical of the liquid in the glass?

Lepeltier’s answer is measured but clear.

“There was an attraction to this movement, to the taste of the wine, and to the value behind it. So there was a success and that success did lead to some marketing abuse which made its way down to sommeliers,” she says.

This is perhaps the most critical point. The dilution of the movement was not the result of a single group, but of a chain of participants including producers, importers, distributors, journalists, and sommeliers. Each of whom responded to the demand in their own way.

In some cases, that demand was shaped by a desire for belonging. Lepeltier offers a particularly insightful observation on this dynamic.



Kitchen Istanbul

"When you start to recognise something it makes you belong to a community," she explains.

In this sense, the embrace of certain flavours, even those traditionally considered faults, was not purely about taste. It was about identity. Recognising and accepting those characteristics became a way of signalling participation in a particular cultural moment.

But that moment had limits.

As natural wine became more widely available, and as prices increased, expectations began to shift. Consumers who were willing to accept variability were less willing to accept inconsistency. Wines that failed to deliver pleasure, regardless of their philosophy, began to lose their appeal.

Lepeltier describes this turning point with characteristic clarity: "Tastes are evolving. As a sommelier or a customer when you are paying a certain price for a wine from here or there and both taste the same because they are mousy, volatile, and ultimately undrinkable it's like fool me once, but you won't fool me twice" she says.

All three agree that the movement has entered a new phase, one defined less by rebellion and more by refinement. The core principles remain intact, but the tolerance for extremes has diminished.

DiGrigoli says, "What people are looking for is things that are not only farmed thoughtfully, but taste clean and vibrant, not jaggedly as was accepted 5 or 7 years ago."

Rosselini sees it in her daily work with guests and producers: "We're just starting to move past the fact that natural wine means kombucha, people are asking more questions, wanting wines that actually taste good," she says.

Kitchen Istanbul



That nuance, according to DiGrigoli, is perhaps best expressed in the recognition that natural wine is not, and never was, a style: "Using natural to discuss viticulture is a very useful term. But to try to say that it is a style is where we start to err," DiGrigoli notes.

What is emerging is not a rejection of natural wine, but a more mature understanding of it. The binary thinking of natural versus conventional, zero-zero versus manipulated, is starting to give way to something more nuanced, more complete. A necessary way of thinking according to Lepeltier.

"This is why the question of sulfites is extremely frustrating because it's such a minor question compared to the dramatic economic realities that we are seeing today for viticulture all over the world.

Literally vineyards are pulled out, lot of wines are being distilled. There is real human crisis happening. To say I don't drink this wine because there is a little bit of sulfur, or I drink this wine because there is no sulfur

**"We're just starting to move past the fact that natural wine means kombucha. People are asking more questions and wanting wines that actually taste good."**

- Claudia Rosselini

lacks a more holistic perspective that I don't think we talk enough about today."

This distinction is crucial. Many of the world's most revered producers, past and present, would fall under the natural umbrella in terms of their practices, even if they have never used the term. Conversely, wines that are marketed as natural may not always reflect the principles that originally defined the movement.

For sommeliers, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge lies in navigating a category that resists easy definition, and in communicating that complexity to guests in a way that is both honest and accessible. The opportunity lies in applying the lessons of the past two decades to create a more thoughtful, more transparent approach to wine service.

That approach requires a willingness to hold multiple truths at once. To recognise the value of minimal intervention while also acknowledging the role of technique. To celebrate individuality without excusing mediocrity.

To support small producers while understanding the broader economic realities of the wine industry.

Lepeltier, in particular, emphasises the importance of maintaining a holistic perspective.

"There is real human crisis, vineyards are pulled out, and then we are just talking about a little bit of sulfur," she says.

This is a sobering reminder that the debates that dominate sommelier culture about sulfur levels, about definitions, about stylistic boundaries, exist within a much larger context. For producers, these are not abstract questions. They are decisions that affect livelihoods, communities, and landscapes.

It is here that the role of the sommelier must evolve.

In the early days of the natural wine movement, sommeliers were pioneers, introducing new ideas and challenging established norms. In the years that followed, they became, at times, gatekeepers, defining what was acceptable, and occasionally reinforcing a narrow interpretation of what natural wine should be.

Today, the role is something different again. It is less about advocacy for a particular category, and more about clarity. About helping guests understand not just what is in the glass, but how it came to be there.

That means being honest about style. It means distinguishing between wines that are intentionally experimental and those that are simply flawed. It means recognising that minimal intervention does not guarantee quality, and that intervention, when used thoughtfully, is not inherently negative.

It also means acknowledging that the movement itself has had unintended consequences. The emphasis on aesthetic, on labels, on narrative, on identity, has, at times, overshadowed the substance of the wines themselves. For some consumers, this has been an entry point; for others, a barrier.

Rossellini touches on this tension when discussing the appeal of natural wine to younger audiences.

"It gave wine a kind of cache that it hadn't had in a very long time," DiGrigoli notes in a similar vein.

That cultural relevance is not insignificant. It has brought new energy into the wine world, and with it, new perspectives. But it also raises questions about longevity. Trends, by their nature, are transient. Movements that endure do so because they evolve.



Pascaline Lepeltier

# “There was an attraction to this movement - to the taste of the wine, and to the value behind it.”

- Pascaline Lepeltier

In this sense, the current moment feels like a turning point. The excesses of the past decade have been acknowledged. The language is becoming more precise. The wines themselves, in many cases, are improving.

Lepeltier sees this as part of a broader cycle: *“The pendulum is shifting back today,” she says.*

The question is not whether natural wine will remain relevant as it already is. The question is how it will be understood moving forward. If the early years were defined

by disruption, and the middle period by expansion and, at times, confusion, the next phase may be defined by integration. Natural wine is no longer an outsider. It is part of the fabric of contemporary wine culture.

For sommeliers, this requires a recalibration of perspective. The goal is no longer to champion natural wine as an alternative, but to incorporate its principles into a broader understanding of quality.

To recognise that the most compelling wines are those that balance intention, integrity, and

pleasure. In the end, the evolution of natural wine is not a linear story. It is a conversation that continues to unfold, shaped by producers, sommeliers, and consumers alike.

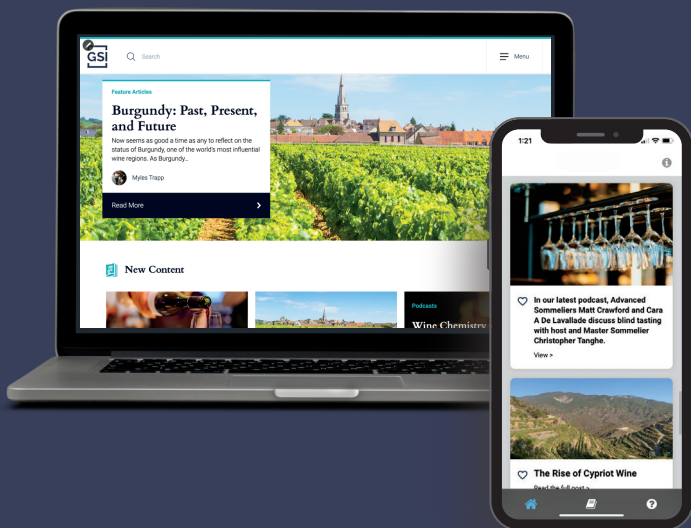
What remains constant is the underlying question that first gave rise to the movement: not what wine should be, but what it could be, if we allowed it to speak more honestly of where it comes from. And perhaps sommeliers must now return not to a position of advocacy or opposition, but to interpretation.

FEATURE ARTICLE



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NatChat: Discussing the Evolution of a Movement



# One Step Closer to Lisbon

There is always a moment, sometime between one significant ASI event and the next when our attentions shift, and a feeling of excitement, and nervousness, builds. It is always immediate. Paris 2023 still lingers in the collective memory, its scale and spectacle difficult to shake. But as the calendar turns and preparations take shape, the focus sharpens. Lisbon is no longer an idea. It is approaching.

What strikes us most in looking ahead to October is not simply the anticipation of the competition itself, but the sense that this edition will carry a different kind of energy. In a previous conversation with those shaping the event, there was a consistent refrain that Lisbon would feel “more personal, more evocative, and true to itself.” That distinction matters. The ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World has always reflected its host, but Portugal seems intent on making that reflection feel intimate rather than monumental.

This aligns with where the profession itself sits today. It can be argued in the 2010s and early 2020s sommellerie became sharper, more globally connected, and more technical. Clearly evident by the final three that stood on the podium of the 2023 ASI Best Sommelier of the World in Paris. Yet at the same time, there has been a quiet

rebalancing toward identity, toward context, toward the human side of hospitality that cannot be reduced to scores or precision alone. Lisbon feels well positioned to capture that balance, the humanity that may well define our profession’s success into the future.

Speaking late last year, **Tiago Paula** described the contest as “a historic milestone for Portugal and for the sommelier profession within the country.” That statement carries weight beyond national pride. It speaks to a broader evolution. Portugal has long been a country of depth, of layered wine cultures that do not always seek the spotlight. What Lisbon offers is not discovery in the traditional sense, but recognition. **Recognition of a country that has quietly built credibility through authenticity rather than noise. That risen to the elite of the wine world with quiet confidence, rather than boisterous ego.**

For those arriving in October, that authenticity will likely be felt in the spaces between the formal moments. The competition itself will, as always, demand absolute rigour. Quarterfinals stretching across two full days, semifinals that test not only knowledge but composure, and a final staged in the Coliseu de Lisboa, where the profession’s highest level is exposed in front of a global audience. The structure remains uncompromising.

Yet around that structure, there is an experience that feels deliberately shaped. The schedule reveals as much. From the opening days at the Sheraton Lisboa, where candidates move from registration into a partner fair and opening ceremony, through to a steady rhythm of masterclasses, regional showcases, and communal meals, there is a clear intention to immerse rather than overwhelm. The inclusion of focused sessions on

regions such as the Alentejo, Beira Interior, Bairrada, Lisboa, Madeira and Vinho Verde, amongst others, alongside local wineries such as Quinta da Aveleda and others suggest a dialogue rather than a monologue, and a sort of loving embrace of Portugal's ever evolving wine landscape. Add in classes from ASI stalwart supporters including Perlage, Japan Sake & Shochu Makers Association

Even the pacing tells a story. Long competition days are balanced with evenings that lean into Portuguese hospitality, whether through a typical national dinner, the Gérard Basset Gala, or the closing celebration at the Pavilhão Carlos Lopes. And threaded through it all is the Bar des Sommeliers, a nightly release valve where formality gives way to conversation and, perhaps more importantly, connection.

That idea of connection sits at the heart of what Lisbon could represent. In earlier discussions, there was a shared hope that the contest would help redefine how the profession is seen, not simply as a technical pursuit but as a cultural one. The aspiration was, and continues to be, that the public would come to view sommeliers as “cultural interpreters, connecting producers and guests through context, emotion, and knowledge.” It is an ambitious goal, but one that feels increasingly relevant.

There is also the competitive narrative itself, which quietly builds as October approaches. New contenders will emerge, some known, others less so. The established names will carry expectation, while a new generation continues to close the gap. If recent contests have shown anything, it is that the margins at the top are narrower than ever, and that a new champion could emerge from any corner of the globe. Preparation is deeper, exposure broader, and the ability to translate knowledge into

a personality laden performance under pressure has become the defining skill.

Lisbon will test that in full. The quarterfinals alone, running across 12 and 13 October, will demand endurance as much as expertise.

By the time semi-finalists are announced on the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup>, the field will already have been significantly narrowed, both physically and mentally. The following day's semifinals will further distil the competition, leaving only three to step onto the stage on 16 October for the final.

And it is there, in the Coliseu, that the broader narrative converges. The theatre of the final has always been central to the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World. It is where the profession reveals itself publicly, where precision meets performance, and where the role of the sommelier is translated for an audience beyond the trade. Lisbon's choice of venue suggests an awareness of that moment, a desire to present the contest not only as a competition but as a cultural event.

If there is a lingering question, it is less about who will win and more about what Lisbon will leave behind. Every contest creates a legacy, though not always in obvious ways. Sometimes it is a shift in perception. Sometimes it is the emergence of a new generation. Sometimes it is simply the reaffirmation of what the profession stands for.

Portugal seems intent on ensuring that its legacy is rooted in something enduring. Not spectacle for its own sake, but a clear expression of identity. Not just a gathering of the world's best sommeliers, but an invitation to understand the context in which they operate.

The ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World 2026 will take place from 11 to 17 October in Lisbon. The framework is set. The city is ready. What remains is the unfolding, and as with any great contest, the most interesting moments will likely be the ones no schedule can predict.



Belém Tower



ASI CONTEST BEST SOMMELIER  
OF THE WORLD

**OCTOBER 11-17, 2026**

# Member News

MEMBER NEWS



## ASI Celebrates its Future Leaders

The Association de la Sommellerie Internationale is pleased to announce the 2026 ASI Diploma examination results. This year, 69 candidates from 18 countries undertook the exam, with 51 achieving success, a strong statement about both the commitment of the participants and the rigorous global standards the ASI Diploma represents.

Among the successful candidates, 19 were awarded Gold, 21 Silver, and 11 Bronze diplomas. Notably, every participating country celebrated at least one successful graduate, underlining the increasingly broad geographic reach and inclusivity of sommellerie at the highest level.

The ASI Diploma remains a benchmark qualification, designed to assess not only theoretical knowledge but also service, communication, and the practical realities of the profession. It sits at the pinnacle of ASI's educational pathway, which continues to expand through initiatives such as ASI Certification 1 and 2, and the new Prep level, providing accessible entry points for sommeliers at different stages of their careers.




## Glasses Raised for International Qvevri Day

On 26 April 2026, sommeliers and wine lovers from around the world celebrated International Qvevri Day, an initiative launched by **Shalva Khetsuriani**, President of the Georgian Sommelier Association, with the support of the National Wine Agency of Georgia. Held annually on the last Sunday of April, the day honours one of the oldest continuous winemaking traditions in the world.

At its centre is the qvevri, a clay vessel buried underground and used in Georgia for more than 8,000 years. Recognised by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, qvevri winemaking represents a rare continuity between ancient practice and modern relevance. As vineyards reawaken in spring, the wines fermenting beneath the surface begin a new phase of life, a symbolic reminder of renewal and continuity.

What began as a national celebration has grown into an international movement. In recent years, events have expanded beyond Georgia, with Austria and France among the early adopters of activities in celebration of the day. For sommeliers, International Qvevri Day has become more than a tribute to history; it offers a platform for education, dialogue, and a renewed appreciation for methods rooted in authenticity, sustainability, and minimal intervention.



Photo: Michel Jolyot



Photo: Michel Jolyot



Armand Melkonian (1969)

# Remembering Armand Melkonian

The passing of Armand Melkonian on 1 April marked the end of a chapter that few in the profession today have truly witnessed, yet all of us have inherited.

In 1969, when Melkonian stood atop the podium at the ASI Contest Best Sommelier of the World in Brussels, the role of the sommelier was still finding its modern identity. Wine service, while respected, had not yet evolved into the global profession we recognise today. There were few study platforms, no standardised pathways, and little of the shared language that now connects sommeliers from New York to Hong Kong. What existed instead were individuals of deep personal knowledge, discipline, and hospitality instinct. Melkonian was among the finest of them, and in many ways, he helped define what would follow.

His victory was not simply a personal triumph. It became a point of origin. Every competitor who has since stepped onto the world stage has done so in the shadow of that first moment, when the idea of a global sommelier competition moved from concept to reality. The standards he embodied, precision, composure, humility, and an unwavering commitment to the guest, remain the quiet framework of the profession.

For those who encountered him later in life, Melkonian was not a distant historical figure but a living bridge to an earlier era of service. His career, notably at La Voile d'Or on the Côte d'Azur in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, reflected a time when sommellerie was built on longevity, on deep relationships with guests, and on an almost intuitive understanding of wine rather than a purely academic one. Yet he never felt out of step with the modern world. Instead, he seemed to remind it of its roots.

In an age where sommellerie has expanded rapidly, across continents, cultures, and increasingly diverse beverage landscapes, it is easy to focus on what is new. ASI President William Wouters reflects, "Melkonian's legacy invites reflection. It asks not what has changed since 1969 but what has remained essential. Beyond knowledge, beyond competition, beyond recognition, the profession still rests on the same foundations that were established by Armand and others in the 1960s and early 1970s: the ability to connect people to a moment, through a glass, with care and intention."

"His passing is, of course, a moment of sadness. But it is also a moment of clarity. The lineage of sommellerie is not abstract. It is human, passed from one generation to the next through example rather than instruction."

In that test of time, Armand Melkonian stands not only at the beginning, but firmly within it, still shaping how the profession understands itself today.



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# Industry News

## Where Precision Meets Judgement: Mondial des Vins Blancs in Strasbourg



**ASI Mag Regional Correspondent**

Joseph Mounayer (Middle East)

**ReadyToWrite**

Arriving in Strasbourg to judge at the Mondial des Vins Blancs for the first time, I expected a well-run international competition. What stood out, however, was the tone set from the top of the tasting panel. Among the notable international judges was Serge Dubs, whose presence, along with other notable international experts, helped shape both the pace and the philosophy of the event.

Dubs, a former ASI Best Sommelier of the World (1989, Paris) and a longstanding figure in Alsace, brings a particular kind of authority. It is not overt or performative but grounded in experience. His approach to judging is measured, calm, and highly structured, reinforcing the idea that consistency matters more than personality in a setting like this. Under his leadership, the tasting rooms felt disciplined without becoming rigid. It is focused, but still open to discussion where appropriate.

The competition itself is substantial in scale. Across the broader event, 546 wines were assessed by 60 judges representing 26 countries. Within the 28<sup>th</sup> edition of the Mondial des Vins Blancs, 487 wines from 15 countries were evaluated, with 146 medals awarded, including 17 Grand Golds. Running alongside it, the European Red & Rosé Wine Contest introduced a smaller but

notable category, with 59 wines and 18 medals.

Yet the numbers are secondary to how the wines are assessed.

What defines the experience is the structure of the judging process. Flights are well paced, glassware is handled efficiently, and the environment allows for concentration. There was a clear expectation of precision in scoring and alignment in standards,

**"The balance between those two poles, objectivity and personal perception, is carefully maintained."**



Slovakian Winery



Strasbourg

**"The emphasis remains where it should be: on the wines, the methodology, and the integrity of the results."**

but also an understanding that tasting is ultimately sensory and interpretive. The balance between those two poles, objectivity and personal perception, is carefully maintained.

The wines themselves reflected a broader shift in the European landscape. There was a noticeable presence from Central and Eastern Europe, alongside southern regions showing increasing confidence in both white and rosé categories. Styles leaned, at times, towards freshness and restraint, with a continued emphasis on indigenous varieties and site expression.

While restraint was on display in many categories, ironically the Grand Prix du Jury was awarded to a wine at the opposite end of the spectrum, as J&J Ostrožovič from Slovakia took the top prize with their 2003 Tokajský výber 6 putňový.

Behind the scenes, the organisation supports this framework effectively. Christin Collins and Frédérique Pierré ensure that logistics do not interfere with the task at hand. Their work is largely invisible during the tastings, which is precisely the point. For judges, it creates the conditions to focus entirely on evaluation.

What emerges, ultimately, is a competition defined less by spectacle and more by clarity of purpose. With Serge Dubs guiding the judging team, the emphasis remains where it should be: on the wines, the methodology, and the integrity of the results.

For a first-time judge in Strasbourg, that clarity leaves a stronger impression than any single bottle.



# WINE IN MODERATION

*Wine in Moderation is the social responsibility movement of the wine sector which aims to empower wine professionals with knowledge and tools to integrate the message of responsibility in every day practices.*

## ABOUT THE TRAINING

With education at the core of the programme, Wine in Moderation has developed a training "Wine for Professionals: from responsible service to sustainable consumption" with the purpose of empowering all wine professionals about the moderate consumption of wine. Through this training, professionals will get all the knowledge and tools to offer the best experience possible to their customer without compromising their experience. Built online, the training offers scenarios, strengthens knowledge, decision-making and communication.

### KEY FOCUS AREAS



Recognising and managing risky situations discreetly.



Maintaining a good service



Aligning responsible service with premium hospitality standards

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- Guide guests through paced tastings
- Recommend style variations versus volume repetition and include non-alcoholic options
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