

Paid to taste wine

Life of a sommelier can be a lucrative, painstaking job

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It's easy for people to whine about their jobs, but harder for someone to make their career all about wine.

A sommelier, or wine steward, usually works at an upscale restaurant and is in charge of everything related to the business' wine collection. Customers who have questions or need recommendations ask the sommelier, and they pick out the right wine pairing to go with a specific meal.

Although a college degree is not always a prerequisite, most sommeliers have several years of experience to be paired with certification programs.

Mike Moyer, director of the wine and viticulture technology program at Lake Michigan College, helps run a commercial teaching winery that allows students to learn the art, science and business of wine. Moyer said a sommelier is more of the "front-of-a-house person" in the hospitality industry. Many often make the wine list in addition to visiting the tables.

"There's a lot of overlap between production and the science of wine," Moyer said. "Some of the training is similar. A sommelier is kind of its own discipline. Often, they are required to know so much more."

Moyer said the service component is big. By that, Moyer means a sommelier tends to learn about spirits, after-dinner drinks and more about alcohol service in general.

The Court of Master Sommeliers has four levels of training and certification in order to become a sommelier. Level 1 is an introduction course and Level 2 is a way to officially become certified.



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Maitre d' Samer Badreddine pours a glass of red wine Tuesday at the Bistro On The Boulevard in St. Joseph. The Bistro offers customers more than 80 red and white wines to choose from.

Southwest Michigan has become one of the most prolific wine-producing regions in the country, but that doesn't mean the area will see several master sommeliers pop up anytime soon. Like many crafts, it takes time to become fully accredited and achieve the pinnacle title as master sommelier.

"Level 2 is relatively easy to be attained," Moyer said. "Then you go to the advanced Level 3. Completing Level 4 means you are considered a master sommelier. But it will take at least two or three years to get there after earning the level two certification."

The beverage world

Rick Cooper, the beverage director at Lambrecht's Liquor Store in St. Joseph, has been a certified sommelier since the 1990s. He's done beverage consultations, taken part in tasting panels and is also a certified beer judge.

He knows the certification process can be painstaking.



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Michael Moyer, director of the Enology and Viticulture program at Lake Michigan College, tests a batch of wine on Jan. 28, 2015 at the Benton Township college. Moyer said there are various levels of certification when it comes to becoming a sommelier.

The Master Sommelier's Diploma exam first introduced in the United Kingdom 40 years ago is considered to be the world's most challenging wine examination. Cooper said there might be only 200 people in the U.S. who

have passed and have full certification as master sommeliers.

"It is pretty painstaking," he said. "My accreditation is more Italian-based. There's blind tasting and sometimes people will train for years.

They may pass the tasting part, but there's a written part that is kind of like writing a thesis."

Cooper is not a master sommelier, but caught the beer bug when he worked

See WINE, page A8

WINE

From page A1

in English pubs during a university exchange program and discovered the remainder of the beverage world – which included wine. From there, he grew interested in retail and retail marketing. In that industry, becoming a certified sommelier was a necessity.

Sommeliers with the most training can expect six-figure salaries once they find a top restaurant, Cooper said. However, the pay gap can be big as the median salary is more than \$50,000 a year.

Moyer said while it's become a norm for high-end restaurants and hotels to employ sommeliers, he believes the restaurant and tourism industry could benefit from more wait staff to have an understanding of wine.

“I think it would be good for local producers to take some training,” Moyer said. “One of the things I found challenging is people from Michigan don't have an appreciation for their local wine. A lot of people who drink wine tend to go to California. But Michigan wine tends to hold its own.”

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