

Eyes on the Prize

Once you've made the decision to pursue a professional certification, there's more to making the grade than meets the eye

by Deborah Parker Wong, AIWS

For anyone considering, or already pursuing, one of the beverage industry's most rigorous professional certifications—the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) Diploma—aligning your expectations and **ADOPTING STRATEGIES** will make navigating the program easier and significantly more rewarding.

California Regional Manager with Frederick Wildman and Sons, where his WSET status helped him connect. “As far as credentials go, it’s **A VALUABLE THING TO HAVE ON YOUR RESUME**,” Bond says. “The hiring manager at Wildman earned his Diploma in New York, and it definitely caught his eye when he reviewed my resume.”

Since the WSET’s Diploma program is an exercise in **LEARNING FROM YOUR MISTAKES**, hindsight led me to consider how my own recent experiences and those of several students who entered the program around the same time could benefit new candidates. The WSET frequently modifies the requirements of the Diploma to keep pace with the industry; an introduction to the organization and the current requirements can be found online at www.wset.uk.org.

Taking Stock

Understanding how you learn is key to mastering the large amount of material required for each Diploma unit. With the option of classroom lectures or home study for all units, Bond preferred to attend lectures. “I enjoy the Socratic method, and in many cases, I learn as much from my peers as I do from the instructors. While I get a lot out of lectures, **ATTENDING CLASSES WITH YOUR PEERS** builds social equity—something that is a valuable part of the WSET.”

Adam Chase, AIWS, runs the WSET program in Northern California and he encourages students to attend lectures whenever possible. “We offer students a broad perspective; **CLASSES ARE LED BY INDUSTRY EXPERTS**, representatives from the WSET in



With only 36 Diplomas awarded in the U.S. by the London-based WSET in 2008, the benefits of sticking out this program, which can be completed in as little as two years or self-paced over a longer period, are many. WSET certification is a proven way to differentiate yourself in any job market. Diploma candidate William Emile Bond III recently accepted a position as a Northern

London and Masters of Wine Peter Marks and Joel Butler, all of whom provide valuable insight.”

Wine educator and Diploma graduate Annette Hanami, AIWS, CWE, who has since entered the Master of Wine program, preferred **A COMBINATION OF LECTURES AND HOME STUDY**. “For me, the main difference between studying at home and attending lectures is not having the WSET-selected wines to work with, but then, some of the best students in the program prefer home study.”

I opted for the same approach and attended lectures until I passed the largest and most difficult Diploma units, and then went to home study for the smaller units, with varying degrees of success.

Strategic Considerations

Because the Diploma is largely a self-directed pursuit, **IMPROVING YOUR STUDY HABITS** can make a difference. Many students, like Dan Culley-Rapata, AIWS, participate in tasting groups and form small study groups. “Working in a small study group creates an interactive approach, and it was a strategy that worked well for me,” says Culley-Rapata, who attended all of the lectures and also benefited from networking. “I went to the tastings and formed the study group with people that I met in class; I never would have done it otherwise.”

Taste, Taste, Taste

If there’s one collective word of wisdom that can help you allocate your study time, it would have to be tasting. Most students participate in **TASTING GROUPS THAT MEET WEEKLY** in the months leading up to the Unit 3 exam, and some for the duration of the program.

Mulan Chan, AIWS, the Rhône Valley and French Regional Wine Buyer for San Francisco’s K&L Wine Merchants, and I ran a tasting group that Bond, Hanami and Culley-Rapata, along with many others, attended. We tasted through recommended wines and practiced timed note-writing with the goal of making the WSET’s systematic tasting technique second nature. “The tasting group was essential,” says Chan; “it gave

me **AN OPPORTUNITY TO NETWORK** and exchange ideas, and through it I felt more connected to the program.”

Industry tastings, typically free to the trade, can be one of the best ways to **FOCUS ON A SPECIFIC REGION OR STYLE OF WINE**. For example, the annual Tre Bicchieri tasting of Italian wines was the perfect opportunity to focus on understanding traditional and contemporary styles of amarone. More often than not, producers themselves are doing the pouring and happy to answer in-depth questions. While trade tastings can be noisy and crowded, they are indispensable for comparative tasting.

Testing

The form used for Diploma exams—extemporaneous (on-the-spot, closed book) essay writing—could be viewed as an arcane skill. “Not so,” says wine educator Hanami. “[Essay writing] highlights what you don’t know and pushes you to fill those gaps; it forces you to see the big picture—something you need in order to be competitive in the trade.” Her experiences in the Master of Wine program shed additional light on the benefits of this approach. “It’s not about memorization; it’s all about communication. The goal is to be able to **COMMUNICATE CLEARLY AND WITH AUTHORITY**.”

Culley-Rapata, who was offered a coveted sales position at Chambers and Chambers after he earned his Diploma in 2008, finds that it helps him sell wine. “By writing the exams, you achieve a level of expertise that comes in handy when you are making an argument on your feet.”

Ready, Set, Go

In a timed testing environment, one common mistake is failing to **READ QUESTIONS CAREFULLY** or, in the case of the blind tasting, failing to read them at all. “It’s easy to make simple mistakes that can sabotage your exam,” said Culley-Rapata “and that makes it even more important to stay calm.” The consequence of failing an exam is the cost of a retake and a grade no higher than pass, regardless of your performance the second time around. He offers this advice: “**KEEP IN MIND WHY YOU LOVE THE SUBJECT**; it helps make learning fun.” ■■

THE PERFECT SUMMER MIX



PATRÓN POMEGRANATE

1 oz. Patrón Silver
1/4 oz. Patrón Citrónge
Fresh pomegranate juice
Lime squeeze

Method:
Pour Patrón Silver and Patrón Citrónge over ice. Fill with pomegranate juice. Finish with a squeeze of lime. Enjoy.



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