

In my last column I mentioned the success of my three young sommeliers. If I had a pound for every time someone asked me about exactly what a sommelier competition involved I would be a millionaire, well maybe, not but I would certainly be a very rich Frenchman.

When I explain what a sommelier competition involves people are often surprised by my answer. As the former winner of the regional 'Sommelier of the year' final I do have first hand experience of what type of preparation needs to take place before the event. The preparation is huge is all encompassing it not only takes over your life but becomes your life, your drive and your inspiration. A famous quote from Tiger Woods 'The more I practice the more lucky I get' is not only true for the golfing world but also for the world of the sommelier.

The most important criteria to be a winner is time dedicated to the world of wine. The base is to start with vocational work in the industry, serving customers understanding the fundamentals of the industry and learning not only how to meet but also how to exceed customer expectations. The world of wine is dynamic; it is always changing and developing. This is why simply working in a restaurant isn't enough to be a champion you must instead embrace this movement through travel, study and interaction with our sommeliers. You may think that flying off to a vineyard in France or Australia seems to be a perfect holiday, as a sommelier its work but of course I wouldn't deny that it isn't the more enjoyable and interactive part of the job. Visiting the vineyards gives you first hand knowledge that you just couldnt get elsewhere. Meeting the producer behind the wine gives you an insight into the history and philosophy and of course you have the chance to sample the wine as well. Unfortunately as a sommelier you can only dream about visiting all the estates in the world that's why studying becomes an important part of your leisure time.

After months or even years of preparation the day of the competition is a nervous affair. The competition for the UK Sommelier of the year is almost like a scene for Great British Menu. The stage of the final is set-up like a restaurant, complete with difficult customers and challenging staff. Each of the sommeliers demonstrates their ability to deal with difficult customers, their knowledge of wine and the drinks business and their management skills. They will then complete a quick-fire blind tasting and the infamous 'champagne pour' where a magnum of champagne has to be completely poured into 16 flutes without returning to any of the glasses. Who said being a sommelier was an easy or boring job?

As I mentioned earlier the world of wine is always changing. Competitions are indicative of our dynamic industry as a whole therefore winning the title of UK Sommelier of the year is not the end but merely the beginning of this competitive journey. By the time you read this I will know whether my assistant at Sharrow Bay Franck Gerome has succeeded in his dream of becoming one of the top sommeliers in the UK.

It is important to note that entering a competition as a Sommelier is a personal choice. Sommeliers who don't enter competitions are not in any way poorer than those that do, they simply choose to develop through other means in order to reach their overall goals in their careers.

à bientôt

Nico