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UNCORKING THE CITY

New York Women Make Marks as Masters of Wine

Winning Diplomas Takes Years; 'Shower Curtain Reader' Can Help

By LETTIE TEAGUE

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Mary Gorman-McAdams, Jean K. Reilly and Jennifer Simonetti-Bryan, who are among the only 10 women in the U.S. who hold a Masters of Wine diploma, one of the greatest achievements in the wine world. *Cassandra Giraldo for The Wall Street Journal*

It's no secret that some of the most accomplished and ambitious women in the world live in New York. What's not well known is that several are Masters of Wine.

Considered by many to be the single greatest achievement in the wine world, the Masters of Wine diploma can take years—even decades—to acquire and costs thousands of dollars.

There are 312 MWs world-wide, although most are residents of the U.K., where the Institute of Masters of Wine is based.

And there are 34 MWs in the U.S., including 10 women—and more than half of them live in New York.

Earlier this week, I caught up with three of these MWs—and "caught" is the operative word because MWs always seem to be on the move. They travel the world for various wine-related reasons. One even does a bit of wine-related sky diving, too.

By the time I arrived at Morrell Wine Bar & Café, the women—Jean Reilly, Mary Gorman-McAdams and Jennifer Simonetti-Bryan—were already drinking Champagne and discussing the relative scarcity of its particular type.

"It's rare you see a Blanc de Noirs on a wine list in the states," observed Ms. Reilly, who pulled a two-year stint as Morrell's wine director and purchasing director for its retail store, Morrell & Co.

"It's so hard to get the grapes ripe," agreed Ms. Simonetti-Bryan.

"But with global warming ... ," replied Ms. Reilly, allowing her thought to trail off but everyone knew what she meant and nodded in agreement.

This wasn't exactly garden-variety girl talk. And yet as savvy as these women are about wine, they are often assumed to know much less than they do—simply because they are women.

Ms. Reilly has lost track of the number of times a male companion has been handed the wine list and Ms. Simonetti-Bryan related this anecdote: "I ordered a glass of Sancerre and it was corked so I sent it back and said I'll have the Albarino instead." Then, the Albarino turned out to be oxidized. When Ms. Simonetti-Bryan returned the second flawed wine, the waitress said: "I think I'll get you a glass of white Zinfandel."

To earn the Master's of Wine diploma, a candidate must pass a three-part test.





Champagne at Morrell Wine Bar, 1 Rockefeller Plaza *Cassandra Giraldo for The Wall Street Journal*

The exam is so rigorous that it takes at least three years to pass—and often much longer. And many fall short of their goal. About 25 candidates take the test each year in the U.S., Ms. Reilly said, and sometimes no one makes it all the way through. That's what happened in 2009, she noted.

The examination includes a theory section, which requires candidates to submit papers on various aspects of viticulture, winemaking, current (wine) events and the wine business.

The second portion, called the Practical, is an extensive blind tasting—both an assessment and accurate identification of the wines.

The third part is a research paper on a topic chosen by the candidate and approved by the institute. It must be 6,000 to 10,000 words long. "And not a word over," said Ms. Simonetti-Bryan.

Ms. Reilly took the test five times before she passed it in 2010; the others took it several times, too.

The group studied together off and on, and did a great deal of blind tasting together and apart. All of the women had a background in the wine business—another requirement of the institute.

Ms. Reilly, 47 years old, was a sommelier and wine buyer and Ms. Simonetti-Bryan, 40, was a brand manager for wine and spirits companies. Ms. Gorman-McAdams, 50, worked at the International Wine Center in New York and for a public-relations company.

They also had careers unrelated to wine—in finance and technology. "I made a six-figure [salary] before going into the wine business," was an oft-repeated phrase.

Today, Ms. Reilly is a freelance wine writer, educator and event host as well as a professional sky diver. She even sky-dives at wine events.

Ms. Simonetti-Bryan is an author and a partner in Wine Ring, a technology company, and Ms. Gorman-McAdams is the North American wine market adviser for the Wines of Bordeaux.

The group had a fourth member, Christy Canterbury, who was in Texas when I met her fellow MWs. Her contributions, though, were lauded by the group—particularly her creation of "the shower curtain reader," i.e. laminated pages, that she and Ms. Reilly devised so that they wouldn't "waste a minute" while studying for their exams. Ms. Canterbury is now a journalist, speaker and wine judge.

The women's studies not only went on for years but cost plenty as well.

Each woman estimated she had spent somewhere between \$40,000 and \$80,000 to get their diplomas—mostly on wine and travel.

Mentoring is key for MW candidates. All of the women had mentors and each is now mentoring MW candidates.

One of the mentors that two of the women shared was Mary-Ewing Mulligan, the first American woman to earn an MW (1993) and the president of the International Wine Center.

I caught up with Ms. Ewing-Mulligan over the phone. She was traveling—of course.

I wondered if she had any advice for aspiring female MWs.

"I'd give them the same advice I'd give to a guy," Ms. Ewing-Mulligan replied a bit tartly. "It's not enough to know all the famous wines and the impressive names. You need to understand the retail trends, the three-tier distribution system. Stay well-rounded in all the wines of the world."

And don't forget to make a shower-reader, perhaps.

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