

# 5 DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE QUESTIONS ELICIT ILLUMINATING AND INFORMATIVE ANSWERS FROM 8 INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS

**Michèle Shah** organized a wine tour of Sicily for wine professionals and interviewed eight of them exclusively for *Sommelier India*



**Angela Muir MW - UK:** Has 41 years in the wine business. Chairman and past president of the Wine and Spirit Association. Currently chairs *Decanter* magazine's DWWA Central & Eastern European panel and is also the Director of Oeneo SA and Amphora Design Ltd

**Anne Tupker MW - USA:** Founded *Bouquet Wines* in 1990. Passed the MW exam in 1997, winning the Sainsbury Prize for her dissertation on Cool Climate Viticulture, and the Madame Bollinger Medal for wine tasting. Member of the Institute of Masters of Wine events committee since 1998



**Tim Atkin MW - UK:** Award-winning wine writer, photographer, show judge, teacher and lecturer. Co-chairman of the International Wine Challenge, publisher of *timatkin.com* and contributor to publications in the UK, USA, Hong Kong and Australia

**Jane Boyce MW - UK:** Ireland's first female Master of Wine in 2000 and still the only MW in Northern Ireland. Consultant and wine trainer at Belfast's Merchant Hotel and wine consultant to Ross's auction house in Belfast



**Lynne Sherriff MW - South Africa:** Elected Chairman of the Institute of Masters of Wine in 2010, the first South African to hold the post. Commercial Director of Vinfruco Ltd from 1991-2000. A respected name on the international judging circuit

**Christy Canterbury MW - USA:** National wine Director for Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group. Corporate Beverage Director for Culinary Concepts by Jean-Georges, where she opened and managed restaurants from Istanbul and Doha to Vancouver and Bona Bona



**Alison Flemming MW - Germany:** Export sales director for Reh Kendermann, based at the confluence of three German wine-producing regions. Lectures WSET Diploma in Germany, holds tastings, seminars and culinary wine events, and translates wine and food texts

**Mai Tjemsland MW - Norway:** Judge at the Ultimate Wine Challenge. Consultant wine buyer for Norway's largest brewery. Contributing taster at *vitis.com*. Wine Editor for the *Garrubbo Guide* and the *Italy Wine Editor* for the *Professional Wine Reference*



Michèle Shah wearing a hat, centre, with the MW group at the Acropolis in Agrigento

Edited excerpts:

*What is the future of wine and in which direction is it headed? How is it different from past traditions and is the wine-drinking experience giving way to a new lifestyle?*

**Angela Muir:** In traditional producing countries, wine was, for millennia, part of the daily diet, used among other things, as a crude sanitiser of questionable water. When it tasted good, it was a bonus, not a requirement. But it is now a luxury, not a necessity, so if it doesn't please the person who pays for and drinks it, it has failed. As scientific understanding and care for vineyards grow, the choice of flavours grows too. I watched each country in Europe contribute to the UK wine experience: the Germans who used to drink their top Rieslings on their own after an early supper; the French and Italians who only drank wine with their meals; the Spaniards who drank local wines by the glass with tapas while on their evening stroll; the countries of former Yugoslavia who added sparkling water to make a long drink (hiding a multitude of winemaking sins). From England we went on foreign holidays and copied them all indiscriminately.

**Anne Tupker:** I think wine is becoming more democratic, with more approachable styles, and less of a niche product. The challenge is to educate the general public, who are

interested in wine but still find it intimidating. More wines by the glass in restaurants make it easier and more fun to try different wines. I'm a great fan of the Vinimatic dispensers. The restaurant experience is generally friendlier and more relaxing, but the huge amount available in supermarkets is rather baffling. Small, independent chains and merchants with well-trained staff should be the way forward.

**Tim Atkin:** People are drinking wine more with food these days. I also perceive a move towards wines with real personality and sense of place, shifting away from big, oaky, alcoholic wines. Lifestyles vary from place to place, but I'd say that most of us are time-poor these days and so want to drink wines that really say something to us, that communicate real distinctiveness. I think that explains the rise of natural, organic and biodynamic wines.

**Jane Boyce:** I think the future for wine is bright provided it is handled carefully and not allowed to become a commodity. We may complain about the prices of First Growth Bordeaux

but at least it enables wine to remain an aspirational product, which varies from vintage to vintage and therefore has a link with nature. Wine is one of the oldest beverages known to mankind so I don't think it is going to disappear over the next century. The world has got smaller with internet, cheap travel and technology, so though it is becoming more homogenous, it is also driving a revolution in indigenous grape varieties. The wine drinking experience has always varied according to a country's culture: in Mediterranean countries it was always drunk with food whereas in non-producing countries like the UK and parts of the US it tends to be drunk socially and mainly without food.



**Lynne Sherriff:** We know that countries such as the US, China, India and Brazil are just scratching the surface, so I am really optimistic about the future. I believe that white wines will start to make their presence felt - there is a lot of room for this in a country such as China, where 92% of consumption is red. It is possible that social media will start to influence the modern consumer more than traditional media and that consumers will start to make their choices based on their own or their peer group's impressions. The wine drinking experience is changing and giving way to a new lifestyle in the sense that it might be more carefree and less driven by old traditions such as red wine with meat and white wine with fish.

**Christy Canterbury:** Interest in wine is seeing phenomenal growth. More people are drinking wine more frequently and with meals rather than wine as a cocktail. I see the "tradition of the past" in three parts: 1) high-end wine accessible to connoisseurs or the wealthy 2) everyday wine, often low-end and perhaps not even bottled 3) no wine - those who didn't drink. I think 2 and 3 are blending together as more people drink wine. However, these people are changing in that they are drinking better wine than before. They are drinking better for two reasons: 1) they've decided to drink something higher on the price scale and 2) even if they aren't drinking at a higher price point, winemaking has

improved dramatically. However, it is also seeing new faults as we push the boundaries of quality (lack of balance in the wine, especially with regard to alcohol and exaggerated oak use).

**Alison Flemming:** Taking a European view, I would say that wine consumption has certainly evolved significantly from being an elitist drink in non-wine-producing countries and is seen today as a lifestyle choice. There is also quite a polarisation in terms of both production and consumption: keenly priced wines for the masses which are technically well-made but simple, and at the other end of the scale, top-quality premium wines exhibiting a sense of place for those who truly appreciate wine. Unfortunately the very top estates in some of the classic regions of the world now command prices which are unattainable for the normal lover of wine and have become the preserve of investors and collectors. I do believe there is a middle ground where quality is the prime objective of the wine producer and where the wines do exhibit something unique and different. Sicily is well placed to supply high-volume, well-made wines under IGT, and now DOC Sicily.



**Mai Tjemsland:** The direction to follow is to have wines with less oak, more fruity and clean, and also more expressive of their terroir/region. There will be more competition on price, more consolidations between wineries and local based wineries who need to work together to reach international markets. In the past, Old World regions have been sending out wines which are best described as "rustic" - meaning with off-odours, not expressing the fruit but with defects from unclean barrels - and the results of bad winemaking like overdone, dry oak aromas and oxidation. These are not acceptable for the modern international market any longer. In more and more countries without a tradition for food and wine as a daily combination, wines are becoming a part of daily consumption. But this also leads to pressure on price and quality.

## *Sommelier India is the country's first wine magazine dedicated to nurturing a wine-drinking culture in a society of primarily whisky and beer drinkers. How best can newbies be introduced to wine?*

**Angela Muir:** I'm not familiar with the Indian market. As a consumer country traditionally (even though it, like us,

is now producing some wine) the aspirational middle class will probably try all of the above, much as we did...although

adapted to a much hotter climate. After watching what's happened elsewhere in the world, probably one of the most urgent messages to get through to any would-be wine traders and drinkers is that wine's idea of cool temperature is well under 15°C at all stages of its life - even for reds.

**Anne Tupker:** I'm not familiar with the Indian market, but to interest people in wine, restaurants with knowledgeable sommeliers would be the place to start. They can help by encouraging newcomers to wine to try different styles by the glass without committing to a full bottle that they might not enjoy.

**Tim Atkin:** I have only been to India once, and that was in 2000, so I am not familiar with the market. The way to introduce new drinkers to wine is break it down into smaller chunks: explain grapes, regions, the basics of winemaking, etc. Rather than telling them it's complicated, we should make it simple, at least to start with.

**Lynne Sherriff:** I know far too little about India's vibrant and growing market! The best way to introduce newbies to wine is by de-mystifying it and encouraging people to try and just see what they like.

**Christy Canterbury:** I was in India in 2003 for two weeks and was surprised at how much wine I found produced there. Since then, I have come to know the Grover and Sula wines quite well, even having dined with the owner of the latter. I carried the Sula Chenin Blanc by the glass for two years at New York's Spice Market Restaurant by Jean-Georges Vongerichten. Unfortunately, the wines produced by the state co-operatives (I believe that is what they were) all had cork taint and cleanliness issues at that time. How best can wine newbies be introduced

to wine? Newbies need only a sense of curiosity! It also helps if newbies have the opportunities to try wine without incurring too much expense. In India, the imports are quite pricey, so it is helpful to have local wines. It is also important that newbies are not intimidated when learning about wine. They may just want to enjoy drinking it!



**Alison Flemming:** Unfortunately I am not very familiar with the Indian market. However, coming from a country like the UK without a real wine-producing heritage of its own, I believe that there are a number of ways to increase wine's popularity. These include 1) encouraging "multipliers" such as sommeliers, journalists and trade personalities to spread the word and make wine fashionable, 2) holding wine tastings on all occasions and at all levels, especially at non-wine events when people are relaxed and open to trial and, 3) ensuring widespread distribution to open up the consumer's exposure to wine.

**Mai Tjemsland:** I am not so familiar with the Indian market but we have Indian students on the Master of Wine programme. India has a lot of heavy taxation on imported wines, which makes it difficult for international companies to enter and after what I have understood, it is also important to have good connections with local distributors for long term partnerships. The best way to increase the awareness of wines as a part of daily consumption and culture in a new wine drinking country is to focus on wines which pair well with the local cuisine, and to arrange master classes with different wines which can be paired with local food.



## *How did you first become interested in wine?*



**Angela Muir:** I decided during my last year at university that wine was what interested me and was lucky enough to find a job as soon as I looked. This was in 1970...so the luck was phenomenal.

**Anne Tupker:** Wine is my third career - after publishing and full-time motherhood. It was a long-term interest that I had never had enough time to develop, but when my daughters started full-

time school I realised that the time was right. I did courses at the WSET, and managed to persuade a wealthy friend to let me buy wine for him. This led to a small brokerage business and then Bouquet Wines, plus a sideline educating women about wine - and moving on to their husbands.

**Tim Atkin:** I got a job on *Wine and Spirits* magazine as a languages graduate in 1985. And I've been a wine writer ever since.

**Jane Boyce:** I loved foreign travel, languages, good food, people and geography as a child, so when I was teaching in France as part of my degree course I suddenly had a light-bulb moment that wine was the career for me!

**Lynne Sherriff:** I grew up in the hotel business, studied hotel-keeping and then worked for three years for a Swiss hotelier with a magnificent wine collection where, having tasted Château Margaux and Romanée Conti and various other magical wines, I decided my career was in wine.



**Christy Canterbury:** I began drinking wine at the age of 20. My father never drinks alcohol, and my mother only drinks when I am around. So, I didn't grow up with wine. In fact, my hometown in Texas sits in a dry county!

You had to drive at least 20 minutes to find any wine for sale! With this background, I first drank wine while studying in France for a summer, but the first wine I tasted might have led me away from the category forever; it was a hideous co-op rosé from the Côte d'Azur. Luckily, I kept exploring.

**Alison Flemming:** For me wine combined many elements together, which were, and still are, very important to me: the culture of a country and its people, terroir effects, language and business.

**Mai Tjemsland:** I started on the MW programme in 2005 after finishing my WSET Diploma in 2004. I was a certified Sommelier in Norway from 1996 and then worked as a hostess and Sommelier in my four restaurants in Oslo. Since becoming an MW in 2009, I have gradually sold off most of my restaurants and am left now with one because I want to work more closely with different parts of the wine trade – not only in restaurants.

was working freelance and seeking consultancy work. It is recognized throughout the wine world. It is also a great network of people. In order to pass I had to study hard and challenge myself – I still maintain much of that knowledge and the questioning approach that only the MW qualification gives you.



**Alison Flemming:** I wanted to reach the top of the pinnacle as far as wine education was concerned – so there was no alternative but to do the sometimes gruelling and confidence-challenging MW course. The delight and feeling of pride I felt when I heard that I had passed the exams is difficult to describe to anyone who has not been through the same process. The MW qualification is not a necessity for me in my job, but it does garner a certain respect and gives me “credibility”, which gives both myself and my company definite advantages. It has also helped to open

doors, which perhaps might otherwise have remained shut. But having achieved the qualification does not mean that learning about wine has stopped. For many years I was also exam-panel chair which kept my knowledge up to date and this coupled with knowledge gained on MW trips and from other MWs means that I believe I can be a true ambassador for wine.

**Mai Tjemsland:** The Master of Wine is the highest education for serving the wine trade – meaning to be the best-qualified buyer and quality taster and selector of wines. MWs work in different fields of the trade: in education, like me lecturing new MW students and holding Master classes, as consultants for importers and producers seeking new contacts and markets, in importing for retail chains, as wine journalists – I write for three magazines in Norway. Some of us are also wine competition judges, like I have done, for the Chile Wine Awards, yearly for the Decanter Awards, locally as in Vini di Pesche in Marche in Italy....



### *Apart from the MW Institute's unquestionable exclusivity, how useful is the MW qualification and what broader purpose does it serve?*

**Lynne Sherriff:** The Institute was founded to pursue excellence in education and in order to be a member, you have to pass three examinations: one in theory (closed book), one in tasting (blind) and then you have to write a 10,000 word dissertation following an original piece of research. The MW is a qualification which does several things: It sets the bar for learning about the business, science and art of wine; it creates a community of wine professionals who are to be found in more than 25 countries; it opens doors into some of the most magical and special wine cellars in the world.

**Christy Canterbury:** I'd call the IMW a lifestyle of thinking about wine! The MW qualification is incredibly useful. With the title behind your name, people don't question your knowledge base. Of course, an MW isn't always right; we're human, too, and the field of wine is always changing. But the MW title does mean that you are capable of analyzing wines and ideas in wine as well as communicating your thoughts lucidly.

**Angela Muir:** The MW qualification is all about breadth of knowledge and lends a sense of perspective. The Institute

would love to have a lot more members but we are not dropping the standard of the exam to achieve this. I believe that MWs should pass on their knowledge to the next generation to achieve a better pass rate.



**Anne Tupker:** For me, coming late to the trade, the MW gave me credibility and both boosted my company's profile as well as led to other part-time job opportunities like restaurant consulting and tutored tastings. It has opened doors for me that nothing else could have done, and has also provided me with a strong network of support from fellow MWs.

**Tim Atkin:** The MW is an international standard. That's why I did it: to measure myself against the best. It's a body that does a lot of good in the world of wine by promoting excellence. The qualification has been useful to me as a journalist, but most of all I sat the exam for my own satisfaction.

**Jane Boyce:** The MW Institute was very useful to me when I

### *Which were your preferred wines in Sicily?*

**Angela Muir:** I was surprised and delighted with how the best Sicilian wines age. However, I'm in love with Carricante and Grillo.

**Anne Tupker:** Difficult to choose which Sicilian wines I liked best; all rated very highly. I already sell some of the Planeta wines and would be keen to add some of the others to my wine list, except that their ex-cellar prices would make them highly uncompetitive. If you compare their prices with those of wines of equal calibre from other parts of Italy, they seem overpriced to me.



**Tim Atkin:** Sicily was a revelation. Especially the indigenous grapes like Nero d'Avola, Grillo and Nerello Mascalese.

**Jane Boyce:** In Sicily I enjoyed the 100% Grillo white wines and think they offer great potential. Also I loved Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG and think Frappato has a bright future as well. The best tasting was probably the vertical at Tasca d'Almerita – particularly the flight of Cabernets.

**Lynne Sherriff:** In Sicily I liked the wines and the philosophy of Donnafugata, Tasca d'Almerita, Feudo Montoni, Planeta and Valle Dell'Acate.

**Christy Canterbury:** Some Sicilian highlights were Tasca d'Almerita and Planeta. I've been a devotee of Nero d'Avola for over 10 years, and I've always loved Cerasuolo. I was particularly engaged by the whites – the Carricante Brut at Benanti and the Grappoli del Grillo at De Bartoli were stunning.

**Alison Flemming:** In Sicily, my favourites were the wines of Tenuta di Fessina made by Federico Curtaz and Feudi Montodi made by Fabio Sireci. The Etna wines from indigenous grapes were a true revelation, with very exciting flavours and great elegance and minerality and almost a saltiness with the Carricante, while the special Vrucara clone of Nero d'Avola at Montodi created a highly age-worthy, silky, ethereal style which reminded me of some of the great Burgundies.

**Mai Tjemsland:** Regarding my preferred wines in Sicily, it is not possible to choose the best because it would be unfair to mention only a few – all the wineries visited had their own approach and style. ♦