

As the Wine Industry Grapples with Change, Its Educational Institutions Evolve

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As the [Court of Master Sommeliers-Americas](#) (CMS-A) reels from scandals, some members of the wine world question the significance and longevity of wine education institutions. But not all certification programs are created equal.

“In the Masters of Wine [MW] world, there is more of an equal footing between men and women, with 53% and 47% holding the certification, respectively,” said Bree Stock, MW, during a November 10 panel discussion, “[I’m Speaking](#),” with five female Masters of Wine. “This is not the case with the Court of Master Sommeliers-America, where only 20% of those certified are women.”

In a separate interview, Adrian Garforth, executive director of the Institute of Masters of Wine (IMW), says the IMW has never compared itself with the CMS. However, he confirms these numbers and adds that, as of last year, of the 157 people who applied for the program last year, 57% were male and 43% female. “We are fast moving towards a 50-50 gender mix,” says Garforth.

He also comments that over the last 10 years there has been a far greater intake of MWs from Asia, India, Japan and China, as well as North American MWs who identify as BIPOC.

Furthermore, 70% of IMW staff identify as female. Of the 12 MW board members, eight identify as female and hail from six different countries, and have “a variety of experiences and skills from within the wine trade,” says Garforth. When he started his post in 2019, Garforth was the first male-identifying IMW executive director since 2002.

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regardless of sex or color. We have to have rights for everyone.”—
*Alicia Towns Franken, Wine Unify***

Increased organizational representation can be important to wine professionals at all stages of their careers.

“Even though I spent more than a decade as a sommelier and began with that certification, I wanted to be part of an organization that is more representative of the industry workplace, whose accreditation process was transparent and merit-based. The MW provided that,” says Stock in a follow-up interview.

Mary Margaret McCamic, MW, notes that marginalized groups can feel pressure to become credentialed in order to be competitive in the industry. “Education is power and when you’re a marginalized group seeking power, education is a powerful tool.”

For Ashley Hausman, MW, the IMW represents a more complete sampling of the industry, including retail, distribution, hospitality and journalism. “From this pool, you naturally will get a wider array of perspectives, range of talents and global experiences,” she says.

Hausman also comments that the IMW testing protocol is more “internal and silent.”

“I went through CMS-A and became a Level 2 Certified Sommelier in 2009, but I knew that I did not want to go further, as it would require me to be examined in a public space—to recite information orally. This made me very self-conscious,” she says. “I

imagine those who struggle with public speaking would feel more intimidated by those in positions of power critiquing them in the open, as the CMS-A exam is designed to do.”

Conversely, IMW admissions, assignments, examinations and assessments are all graded anonymously.

But weighing the differences of wine certification institutions needs to be part of a larger conversation.

“The question any certification body has to ask is what the credentials mean,” says Hausman. “Is it retention of facts? Parlor tricks with blind tasting? ... Or can it be leadership and global exchange of thought in order to address some of the biggest challenges we face in wine today? Challenges that have systemic implications for the social, environmental and economical health of our industry.”

Unconscious biases and other prejudices based on race, gender, sexuality, religion and the like are currently topics of discussion in the wine industry, but these issues extend far beyond wine.

“These are civil right issues—education and employment regardless of sex or color. We have to have rights for everyone,” says Alicia Towns Franken, wine consultant and member of the board of directors at [Wine Unify](#), a company focused on fostering wine education for underrepresented minority groups.

A 25-year veteran of the wine industry, Towns Franken has seen a steady increase of marginalized groups enter the wine industry. “There are a fair number of women and Black professionals. There’s a lot of us, but the question is visibility. We need to welcome, elevate and amplify the voices of color in the industry.”

The onus should not be on those who are marginalized, she says. Businesses need to do the work rather than simply be allies “on paper.” Industry members should take a more active role toward change.

“What I don’t want is for us [marginalized groups] to be a trend. The bittersweet part of Covid, the racial unrest, and this political climate is that everyone has been watching. We are not a box to tick, we need to move forward and come out smarter, stronger and more inclusive.”