

CRAFTSMAN
OR
LABOURER?

HOW CAN A WINE PROFESSIONAL BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY BY BOTH PEERS AND CONSUMERS? LIM HWEI PENG, CSW, FWS SPEAKS TO SOME WINE AND RELATED INDUSTRIES' PRACTITIONERS TO OFFER A SUCCINCT REFLECTION ON THIS TOPIC.

During my soldiering days, it is a combatant's pride and joy to acquire badges of honour from military courses, such as basic airborne, jungle survival, marksmanship, and ultimately – the army ranger. For the commandos, recognised as the crème de la crème in the Forces, it is common to see the red-beret

soldier exhibiting airborne specialist badge; be successful in both Singapore army ranger and United States army ranger programmes, as well as other international courses such as Pathfinder, Thai airborne, cetera. Those efforts reflect a soldier's professionalism and pride in his vocation. Displaying those badges on their uniform command a definitive respect from fellow brothers in arms, and oozes an indefinite amount of confidence among peers and people they come in contact with. In the civilian world, however, such keenness and seriousness in one's profession seems less straightforward, potentially complicated, and in some cases, lacking in both interest and attitude.

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The Situation

In a weekend visit to a popular restaurant in town, I have curiously asked an outlet manager on the contemporary-looking wine cellar that was erected in the middle of his restaurant. It was filled with fine wines and premium bottles from Bordeaux. Instead of uttering "Bordeaux" correctly, he replied "Bordox" instead. It might be a case of unfamiliarity with a foreign language, which, nevertheless, can be overcome with little effort. Yet, for an outlet manager to be lacking in such initiative reflects his pride in a profession. For the purists, such disregard and lacking, especially in a contemporary food and beverage (F&B) and wine scene, is unacceptable, simply because we are not in an era where information is hard to come by or inaccessible, nor exposure to products is rare and few in between. In essence, that encounter encapsulates a dilemma that the wine and F&B executives have to manage – professionalism, or the lack of it. These days, it is common to see prestigious designations such as 'sommelier', 'wine and food specialist' and even 'wine writer' being freely bantered about on business cards or signatory in correspondence. However, whether those individuals truly live up to such an exclusive vocation is, well, suspicious at most. Most will attest that their designation was given based on their job description, and not of choice or expertise. Such reasoning, as logical as it sounds, is increasingly being seen as improper. Some freely qualify their titles purely from the years they spent on the job. Yet, time macerate in an industry does not make a professional; because if such sense is acceptable, then a butcher could potentially become a surgeon. Designation, especially for a vocation, comes with responsibilities. Both trade and consumers do look towards those supposed experts with expectations. The market place has also changed and evolved into a much complex one, where

consumers increasingly disregard elementary expertise, and seek true professional capability. The proliferation of technology gadgets has also increased expectation in our industries. These days, it is a walk in the park for consumers to seek or verify information via technology tools, ranging from a smart phone to other advanced gadgets. As such, much information can be found just by sliding one's fingers over a screen, and in seconds, consumers are informed of data they desired. If a professional could not provide details beyond those furnished by the gadgets, how could they meet consumers' expectation and gain confidence with their supposed expertise? With Singapore aspiring to be a hub, especially in tourism related sectors, it is imperative that wine and F&B professionals take a firm stand on enhancing their professionalism. A visit to the major cities in Asia will reveal that professionals in those countries have already embarked on certification in their skill and knowhow that are quickly veering towards international benchmark. The need to enhance our professionalism becomes more urgent when we compare our industries to those in established cosmopolitan cities, such as California, New York, and Paris, can we confidently declare that we are comparable to their professionals in aptitude and attitude?

Measures Implemented

Despite the cautionary scenario, there are no lacking of serious professionals, or professionals who take their craft with less pride and aspiration, although they seem to be the minority. Evidently, there are individuals and establishments making efforts to ensure they are future-ready. One such effort is to equip their business associates and employees with competent skill and knowledge training in their respected professional field. Although cost of such investment in qualifying professionals can be hefty, such concerns can be offset by various government agencies' subsidy assistance (Work Development Agency (WDA) is a good example). One other agency that is actively helping the industry is the Employment & Employability Institute (e2i). Since 2009, e2i has been supporting wine programme that are beneficial to employees in the wine, F&B, hospitality and related fields. One such programme is the Certificate in Wine Studies (CWS), an entry level wine programme that aims to certify operational crew (see box story). Yet, despite the availability of support for individuals and companies, I have observed that subsidy aid can at times be sniffed at; or was rejected because individuals have 'no time' or 'very busy' to attend upgrading programmes that benefit their career growth.



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Feedback From Industry – Individual

Fortunately, most forward-looking companies and individuals do capitalise on such upgrading programmes, and it is increasingly common to hear success stories out of those opportunities. One such individual is Lee Chee Wee, Certified Specialist In Wines (CSW). Previously an employee with various wine companies; upon graduation from the CSW programme, he has since assumed a regional role as a South East Asia representative for Europvin – a major Europe wine agency that sees its outreach across international key markets. Lee has been in the trade for some years without a proper qualification as there was no such opportunity to upgrade during his formative years. Upon enrolling for the CSW programme, an internationally-certified wine course, he realised there were indeed gaps in his knowledge despite his years of exposure in the industry. That certification has proven useful to his subsequent progress in his career. "In my regional work, I have to preside over wine events, tasting and product training; being able to conduct and respond confidently in those trade and consumer activities were valuable to my work." Lee shared. Moreover, according to Lee, the CSW certification also provided added recognition to his profession. Part of that acknowledgment was being invited to judge in several international wine competitions. Additionally, the professional wine certification also allows competent and meaningful interaction with international wineries and wine personalities. Although his career is on a roll, he felt that the overall state of affair in the local industry still has some catch-up to do. The lacking in intimate wine knowledge, in Lee's opinion, can delay the maturity of a market. Lee commented, "Distributors are like a window to the wine consumers, if not enough intimate knowledge is acquired; only branded wines will be available in the market. Such phenomenon may lead to consumption being stagnant in the long run." In his views, enrolling in a certified programme is to verify one's knowledge and years of exposure in the trade. It is also a testimony of one's professionalism and passion for the craft. Especially for the rookies in the industry, Lee felt that it is absolutely vital to be certified first, as the structured learning will lead them to understand the trade better, and be able to perform credibly in their job.

Feedback From Industry – Restaurateur

Committing to learn on the job was also a crucial point raised by another wine professional, who manages a five million Singapore dollars wine stock, as well as a crew of service personnel and wine stewards. Timothy Goh, director of wines, Les Amis group (www.lesamis.com.sg), shares similar view as Lee. "Getting certification is indeed a good start." Goh continues, "But more importantly, one needs time to gradually ease into the industry and pick up the essential skills of the trade." The Les Amis group has always been known to produce credible wine professionals. Since the days of Ignatius Chan (who now owns and runs Iggy's,



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a recognised world-class restaurant), established wine professionals that emerged from the Les Amis stable include Aby Tan and Leon Tan. Those individuals are still working with the Les Amis group, albeit in different capacities in Singapore and parts of China. Besides managing the wine business aspect for the group, Goh now helms the role of guiding the junior and preparing them for greater role within the Les Amis group. 'Being patient' was an essential requirement that Goh reiterated in the hour-long interview, "how could someone assume an important role when not enough time is being spent learning how to manage a cellar with stock that could amount to millions of dollars?" In his view, being 'patient' seems to be a hurdle for many newbie joining the trade. "Many candidates who came by to our group for job interview, although possess huge potential, usually hesitate to start from the bottom. They want to reach a 'sommelier' status as quickly as possible; and some also demanded immediate recognition, even though it was clear that they needed more time to be a qualified wine professional." Although Goh agreed that it is a positive trend to have programmes in certifying professionals, or producing cohorts of qualified personnel to fill the industry demand, nevertheless, he has its own reservation. "I believed that certification of a profession is generally positive for the industry growth, as it builds confidence in a person prior to joining the trade," he continues, "however, sometimes, with a recognised certification, the individual can have unrealistic expectation, which the employer may not be able to meet" said Goh. Nevertheless, he felt that such hurdle can be better managed by highlighting industry role models' success stories; so that individuals keen to join the trade



As they toast to wine professionalism, Timothy Goh (left) shares, "To improve and increase professionalism in our market is to cultivate a vibrant culture of wine enjoyment in Singapore." Timothy Tjendra (centre) agrees with the sentiment and adds on, "Until the market has become informed and mature, the need to have certified and qualified professionals must be a priority."

could have an appropriate understanding of the industry demand. Goh also proffers an insight that shed lights on the wine and F&B scene; he shared, 'to improve and increase professionalism in our market, one of the important areas to look into is to cultivate a vibrant culture of wine enjoyment in Singapore. By doing so, it can directly increase the urgency to enhance professionalism.' One such way, he suggested, was to establish a wine-focus publication. The magazine can become an effective platform where it helps to increase interest in wine and wine culture; while trade professionals could benefit from information and update of the wine world and trends. Nevertheless, Goh agreed that there should be stronger emphasis on professionalism as he envisioned that with keener professionals in the industry, it could then attract better and qualified manpower to the vocation. As for the initiatives taken to increase professionalism in the market, such as offering wine certification programme, Goh agreed that it is certainly a step in the right direction. In conclusion, Goh emphasised "More importantly, all stakeholders will need to be patient so as to obtain a desirable outcome".

Feedback From Industry – Decision-Maker

Timothy Tjendra, in a separate chat, also gamely echoed Goh's take on the significance of ensuring a vibrant wine culture, as it will offer a positive knock-on effect on professionalism. Tjendra, a director of The Tastings Room at Marina Square (www.thetastingsroom.com), is no common F&B operator.

He is an Oxford MBA graduate with a strong background in finance enhanced by international market exposure. His observation in his wine business led him to infer that increasing the consumers' awareness in wines will directly lead to a higher level of professionalism in the market. It is also his view that once the general consumers are familiar with wine, this large segment of the market can be a strong base for the industry to grow. Additionally, Tjendra felt that as compared to the food culture, which has took off rapidly and successfully, wine culture has been slow to latch on with similar vigour. In supporting his observation, Tjendra shared, "Just look around the market place, how many credible wine blogs one can find online, as compared to the food blogs?" The uptake on such consciousness in culinary has led to an increase in enrollment for culinary courses, and increasing number of culinary programmes offered in the market place. The Ivy-league graduate also highlighted a consumer trend – fear of the unknown, which he felt will hamper the level of wine appreciation among consumers. "Due to price sensitivity, most consumers would prefer to enjoy wines that they are familiar with,' he continues, 'however, we have realised that one great way to introduce them to unfamiliar wines is through wine by the glass programme." In such wine programme, consumers were exposed to wines that are less renowned yet offer good quality at reasonable price point. For such initiative to be successful, Tjendra felt that the presence of a certified professional will be vital, especially when consumers are keen to acquire more details of a wine. "Certified professionals are also relevant in a setting

where customers yearn for a memorable wine experience" Tjendra commented. Thus, this wine passionate director has enrolled in the programme to ensure that certification adds confidence, credibility and increase business potential at The Tastings Room, especially in top-end corporate events. As an operator, he felt that certification should not be applied as a blunt tool; it should be sharpened and focused in addressing the different market needs. "In managing wines and customers at an entry level, many a time, basic information is sufficient to complete the task," he continues, "consumers at this level is price sensitive anyway." However, his views change when it comes to savvy and well-exposed wine lovers, it is this group of customers that Tjendra insists that professional certifications will be necessary. As certifications verify a professional's years of exposure in the industry, and with added experience, it can translate to confidence and better sales performance, Tjendra felt that until the market has become informed and matured, the need to have certified and qualified professionals must be a priority. Additionally, with qualified professionals in an establishment, the entity is also being viewed as serious in providing professional services and products to a market of savvy consumers.

Looking To Certify Your Expertise?

The following are some of the professional certifications and programmes actively and regularly conducted in Singapore. Though it is not an exhaustive listing, it should provide a good starting point for those individuals and companies aspiring to future-ready your career and businesses respectively.

Wines & Spirits Education Trust (WSET) Programme

There are three levels of certification from WSET available in Singapore. Programme providers include SHATEC. Subsidy available.

Certification In Wine Studies (CWS) Programme

An entry to mid-level proficiency wine programme; endorsed and with certificate issued by Wine Industry Association Of Western Australia (WIAWA). Details can be obtained from Employment & Employability Institute (e2i). Subsidy available.

Certified Specialist In Wines (CSW) Programme

An advanced and in-depth international certified wine specialist programme; endorsed and with certificate issued by the Society Of Wine Educators (SWE), Washington DC, United States. Details can be obtained from Employment & Employability Institute (e2i). Subsidy available.

Professional Wine Studies Programme

This is a practical and comprehensive course designed for busy professionals. Details can be obtained from Temasek Polytechnic. Subsidy available.

In Conclusion

My work regularly brings me to most key cities in Asia Pacific region, as well as major wine land in Europe, South Africa, North and South America, and Australia, I can assuredly share that our industry skill and knowhow is bordering on decline. For decades, we have been enjoying growth without focusing on aptitude enhancement in our field of work. Such practices and mentality are unsustainable, especially so when Singapore is an open market that welcomes talents from everywhere. Thus, the only outcome, of not taking the initiative in managing one's profession, is to lose our competitive edge in a market that will surely and increasingly become more competitive. We can always implement activities or initiatives, such as organising study trips to international cities, or even include exchange programmes. However, if the basic desire to do the best for oneself is lacking, no initiatives can improve the level of professionalism in our industries. Therefore, my recommendation is to have a fundamental shift of mind and attitude.

Firstly, industry professionals are currently clouded by unrealistic job security; one must quickly realise that he/she should take charge and be responsible of his/her career, instead of depending on the employer or company to manage it. A colloquial saying - "no one owes anyone a living" succinctly expressed the need and sense to self-manage ones' career. Secondly, future-proof one's career; a professional must acknowledge that persistence in their vocation with patience and zeal is vital, and a continuous-learning mindset is the sustainable way forward for any professionals. It is time to stop seeking excuses and learn to put up with the necessary inconvenience, when opportunity is given to upgrade our knowhow and skill. LHP, CSW, FWS

About Lim Hwee Peng, CSW, FWS

A Singaporean wine lover and a perpetual student of wines, Lim stresses on continuous wine learning as a sustainable means in increasing professionalism and career growth. Leading by example, Lim has been diligently acquiring international certifications through programmes in Bordeaux, Burgundy, Napa Valley, Spain, Australia, and recently graduating from the French Wine Scholar (FWS) programme. The learning did not stop in the classroom; he also picked up valuable lessons as a wine judge in international wine shows. These days, besides coaching the programme participants in the Certified Specialist in Wines (CSW) and Certificate in Wine Studies (CWS) programmes, he writes for *Cuisine & Wine Asia*, a trade publication, and muses about his wine journey in his wine blog www.drinkgoodwines.com