

JASON WISE (Director), *Somm*, written by Jason Wise. First Run Features, 2013, 94 minutes.

There is no point in hiding the headline: *Somm*, a new film written and directed by Jason Wise, is the best movie about the world of wine since *Sideways*. One was a work of fiction, and the other is a documentary, but both beautifully capture the passion that characterizes so many wine people – whether amateurs who love drinking wine (Miles and Maya in *Sideways*), or professionals who love producing and serving it (the sommeliers, chefs, and wine makers who populate *Somm*). Both films made me laugh; and both films made me cry. With *Somm*, the production values are so high, the cinematography so beautiful, and the music so evocative that you will forget at times that this is a documentary.

Somm is slang for sommelier, the wine professional typically found in fine restaurants. The sommelier - or wine director - is responsible for all aspects of wine service, with particular expertise in wine and food pairing. But some of the most important responsibilities of the best sommeliers are not in the front of the house, but behind the scenes: wine list development, wine procurement, storage, and cellar rotation, as well as staff training. In the film's introduction, Chef Michael Mina describes sommeliers as "the new rock-stars of the industry."

The storyline follows a group of four thirty-something men, three of whom live with their respective wives and girlfriends in San Francisco, and are working as sommeliers in various establishments: Brian McClintic, an affable former baseball player and screenwriter; DLynn Proctor, an intense and self-confident professional; Dustin Wilson, a young man who exudes modesty and warmth, and moved from Montagna at The Little Nell in Aspen to RN74 in San Francisco, with its Burgundy rich wine list; and Ian Cauble, whose life has been dedicated to wine since college, is

remarkably knowledgeable about wine, and has an incredible nose and palate for tasting.

As the film opens, each has already been celebrated as one of the best young, up-and-coming sommeliers in the country, and each has gone through significant wine education, having achieved the first three levels of their professional association's certification: Level I (introductory), Level II (Certified Sommelier), and Level III (Advanced Sommelier). Each now aspires to join the Court of Master Sommeliers, the absolute pinnacle of the profession, a level achieved by only 200 people globally over half a century.

Becoming a Master Sommelier requires passing a three-day exam that is offered only once per year and covers three components: theory, service, and blind tasting. On average, candidates sit for the exam two to three times, and some take it as many as six times. One has three years to pass all three parts. If that is not accomplished, one has to start from scratch. (As Jancis Robinson wrote in her autobiography, *Tasting Pleasures: Confessions of a Wine Lover*, which I reviewed in this journal in 2007, she was the first person outside of the wine trade to pass the exam.)

Every Master Sommelier interviewed in the film says that the exam was the hardest thing they have ever done in their life. Ian is clearly regarded by the other three (and by the film's writer/director) as the one most likely to succeed at this most challenging of tests. The three sommeliers signify their respect by calling him, "Dad."

The film follows their days, weeks, and months - indeed years - of preparation for the Master Sommelier exam, and finally follows them from San Francisco to Dallas where the exam is to be given. Ian candidly acknowledges that "every moment of my life has been how am I going to prepare for this exam." Separately, his girlfriend confirms that "the most important thing in his life is wine, then family, and then me."

Mixed with the main thread of the foursome preparing for the exam are interviews with other sommeliers and vintners about a variety of topics, ranging from the history of wine production in Europe to techniques of viticulture and oenology. Talking heads quickly fade, their words illustrated by scenes that will warm any wine-lover's heart, ranging from the gate at Romanee Conti to a hillside castle in Rheingau, Germany, where the cellar master lovingly pulls out a bottle of 1735 Schloss Johannisberg Riesling.

The film begins with three weeks remaining before the exam, for which the four men have been preparing for well over a year. One of the many characters featured along the way is Fred Dame, the first American to pass the exam, who did so in 1964 in the United Kingdom, and subsequently brought the exam and the system to the United States. We watch as he, along with other Master Sommeliers, help the four young men prepare.

The best I could come up with when trying to relate my life experiences to this was to think back to graduate school, thirty years ago, when I was working with my study group at the end of our first year of the Harvard Ph.D. program in economics, studying together to prepare for the “general examinations” that are the culmination of the first year. But, as intense and stressful as that was, it was nothing like this.

Likewise, the four men’s obsessive use of flash cards - day and night - to memorize the most obscure wine facts in preparation for the theory component of the exam reminded me of my experience decades ago teaching myself a tribal language when living in West Africa, but each of these guys has prepared thousands of cards; indeed, Dustin mentions that he has over four thousand!

It is the scenes of the foursome preparing for the blind-tasting component of the exam that will probably be most gripping for the readers of this journal. In the exam, one is presented with six wines—three whites and three reds—and a total of 25 minutes to describe for each: the wine’s structure, body, alcohol, climate, varietal(s), precise geographic location, and vintage.

Why does blind tasting matter? Various people in the film argue that such blind (“deductive”) tasting increases and improves one’s perception. One travels along a road, then it forks, choose a path, then it forks again, choose a path, and eventually the taster arrives at the wine. Ian swirls and sniffs a glass, and then in rapid succession rattles off: “This wine is from the old world. This wine is from France. This wine is from the Rhone Valley. This wine is from the northern Rhone. This wine is St. Joseph. This wine is from 2008.” Along the way, the scents discussed range from comparing fresh violet (a young Nebiolo) with dried violet (an old Nebiolo), to the much more esoteric, such as a freshly opened can of tennis balls versus a new garden hose!

Why all this exhaustive preparation for the exam? The answer comes from an analogy provided by one Master Sommelier. “Who will be a great maker of samurai swords? It will be someone who had a great teacher, who had a great teacher, who had a great teacher.” So, it is with the best sommeliers. It is not a natural talent, but a learned skill. But anyone who is familiar with academic studies of tasting results, and is skeptical of the ability of professionals, let alone others, to consistently identify wines and rank their quality, will find support for their skepticism in several dramatic and key scenes in *Somm*.

Two-thirds of the way through the 93 minutes of *Somm*, Brian, DLynn, Dustin, and Ian each makes his way to the exam locale in Dallas, Texas. Fifty people will sit for the exam. We learn later that six will pass.

Watching them holed up in their respective hotel rooms, continuing to cram days before the exams are to begin brought forth memories of another film, forty years ago—the young 1Ls (first-year students) of Harvard Law School cramming in a Cambridge hotel room for their final exams in *The Paper Chase*, the 1973 film based on John Jay Osborn Jr.’s novel.

Finally, with 20 minutes left in *Somm*, the exams begin for Brian, DLynn, Dustin, and Ian. The tension matches that found in the best suspense film. With 5 minutes left, each of the four learns the results, and we—as viewers—are present in the room with each as they learn their fate.

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My wife and I arrived for a dinner in Manhattan we had been looking forward to for months. We had canceled our reservation at *Per Se*, so that we could experience *Eleven Madison Park*, the Three Michelin Star and *New York Times* Four Star restaurant that has been ranked as one of the five best restaurants anywhere in the world.

Maitre D' Zach Fischer guided us through the sixteen-course tasting menu prepared brilliantly by Chef Daniel Humm. The menu and execution were sublime, the paired wines were fascinating even for a jaded collector, and the service was absolutely impeccable. Each and every course involved elaborate theater of presentation, was beautiful to behold, and was flavorful beyond words.

The wines? Each was brought to us and lovingly described by *Eleven Madison Park's* wine director, Dustin Wilson, one of the four young men from *Somm*. His lapel clearly featured the small Sommelier pin, the color of which signifies the respective level of achievement: Certified Sommelier, purple; Advanced Sommelier, green; and Court of the Master Sommeliers, red. Dustin's pin is small, but its color is vivid. To discover the hue, please see the movie, or have dinner at *Eleven Madison Park*. Neither will soon be forgotten.

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