



What It Takes to Be a Sommelier Today

DEDICATING YOURSELF TO a career as a wine specialist in the hospitality industry is harder than it's ever been. I'm saying this from the perspective of someone who took his first sommelier position in 1978, when sommelier sightings were as rare as endangered species. Nowadays, seemingly everyone wants to be one.

I can't say I blame anyone. It is a glamorous job that is intellectually and aesthetically fulfilling, despite the salary limitations: The Court of Master Sommeliers (CMS) brutally estimates the salary of the average restaurant sommelier as being somewhere in the range of \$45,000–\$75,000—well within the low-income bracket in large cities such as San Francisco and New York, where most sommeliers are employed. This qualifies as poverty-level wages in Honolulu, where I spent my first ten years in wine industry as a full-time sommelier. Even in lower-cost cities such as Las Vegas, the average sommelier salary falls well short of the \$94,000 estimated for living in “sustainable comfort.”

It's not just the issue of compensation that contributes to an atmosphere of instability. As any of today's working sommeliers would tell you, there are few jobs in the world as precarious, as the pandemic

has forced most restaurants to prioritize keeping the lights on over retaining such positions. Nonetheless, wine appreciation in the United States is greater than ever. While America's per-capita consumption of wine has leveled off over the past five years, wine sales have increased by over \$15 billion just over the past three years, according to the 2024 BMO Wine Market Report. This is nothing to sneeze at. In restaurants, wine sales—and with them, sommeliers—are still a key to success.

So what does it take to be a sommelier these days, particularly in order to qualify for CMS examinations? Same as it ever did, at least in my experience: Become a master of multitasking who's too important for a restaurant to live without. Today's sommeliers must join the ranks of restaurant managers and be willing and able to hire, fire, and train staff; make schedules; take reservations; seat guests; manage sections; clean restrooms; chop vegetables; plan events; write newsletters; file P&L reports; maintain POS systems; run dishwashers; and set and wait on tables (for instance, Bobby Stuckey, MS, the owner of Boulder, Colorado's nationally acclaimed Frasca, still calls himself the “head busser”). All of this, of course, is on

top of making selections for the list, opening bottles at tables, and discussing wine with guests.

If anything, these are the minimum requirements for restaurant managers and, by extension, for working sommeliers. It goes without saying that the more you master all of the above, the more valuable you become to a business, thereby earning a salary that actually falls within the range of “sustainable comfort.” For prospective sommeliers, this is the experience you must accumulate and use to sell yourself to potential employers.

It may sound challenging and even scary, but trust me, it can be even more fulfilling than working exclusively as a cellar manager or bottle opener. Why? Because the more stake you have in the operations of an entire restaurant, the more likely you are to understand exactly what kind of wine program is necessary to achieve, one, critical acclaim, and two, financial success. Rather than simply showing up to turn the lights on and off, you are turning guests on to a great experience and increasing your own motivation to be part of something bigger—bigger, that is, than being just another dime-a-dozen sommelier. 