In the first of Drinks Trade’s regular education and training features, Sarah Davey outlines the Court of Master Sommeliers Diploma and why wine professionals should get on board.

With a boost in people forging careers out of the liquor industry, the role of education has become increasingly important across all categories in the trade.

What is the Court of Master Sommeliers?

Established nearly four decades ago in the UK to encourage improved standards of beverage knowledge and service in hotels and restaurants, the Court of Master Sommeliers Diploma takes the art of beverage service to a new level of appreciation and understanding. Overseen by a group of individuals known as the Court, the program is offered in countries such as the US, the UK, Vienna, Argentina, Shanghai, Singapore and Hong Kong. Since its inception over 170 applicants have achieved the Master Sommelier title, proving that education is not only important but highly regarded by wine professionals around the world.

The Australian branch was established in 2008, when distributor Fine Wine Partners took on the responsibility of hosting it in Sydney and Melbourne. Chairman for the wine supplier, Rob Hirst said it wasn’t a matter of if, but when the program would arrive down under. “It was in 2006 that I first started talking about bringing the program to Australia,” Rob said. “I have always been of the opinion that education is so important in this industry and so I pushed very hard to get the Court to host the introductory and certified levels of the Diploma in Australia.” Having been involved in the bringing of the Master of Wine title to the country in his Tucker Seabrook days, Rob has seen how the industry has changed since people have started taking education more seriously. He is a strong believer in the importance of education, and says the Court of Master Sommeliers is the perfect vehicle for people who are looking for global recognition within their trade. “If you are educated well, you become confident in your role,” he said. “With more people taking hospitality roles seriously, there is a lot of competition so you really need to blow people away with your skills if you want an edge.”

Rob also believes the role of education extends to beyond beverage service. “I’ve always said that there is no point in winemakers making fine wine if there are no people out there who can understand it,” he said. “You need people on the floor who can confidently talk about a wine – it’s all about spreading the word.”

What is involved?

Australian wine professionals can undertake the Introductory and Certified levels in Sydney, Melbourne and now Brisbane. Advanced and Masters levels are held in the UK due to the amount of Master Sommeliers available there to assist in the testing. According to Evan Goldstein, a US Master Sommelier graduate from the 1980s and one of the three Master Sommeliers conducting the Australian Diplomas this year, six Masters are required in order to offer the higher levels of the diploma. “Over time, I have seen the number of Master Sommeliers
grow and I have no doubt that Australia will catch up soon,” he said. “In the US, we started with only 40 of us and now globally we are reaching 200 – I think this really speaks to not only how important training has become but how wine has evolved to meet demand and of course consumer curiosity.”

The Introductory and Certified levels involve intensive review, instruction and training by a team of Master Sommeliers on wines and spirits knowledge and wine service. Day one finishes with a multiple choice exam, with the top students moving to the Certified level held the next day. This part of the Diploma involves a blind tasting using the deductive method, a written theory examination and a practical service examination. Scores are confirmed by the end of the day, and a scholarship is presented to the student with the highest score. “The Petaluma Scholarship pays for the top student to travel to the UK to undertake his or her Advanced Level exam,” said Rob Hirst. “It is an incredible achievement for the winner and one which we are proud to offer.” The scholarship winner for 2010 was Jarod Mills from the Merivale Group, who will head to the UK and sit for his Advanced Diploma.

What are some of the benefits?

A certified Master Sommelier is a ‘portable’ title. It is recognised around the world and enjoys a prestigious reputation. Some of the major benefits of the title include increased promotion and job opportunities and salary prospects as well as personal job satisfaction. Rob Hirst believes the seller is the best asset a venue can have. “If you have a good, knowledgeable seller on your floor, there is every chance you will be able to move more beverages,” he said. “In addition, a good wine list is the culmination of what you can learn during the course of your Diploma; a well-structured wine list that can be explained readily to customers is a big win for any venue.”

Information gained at the Court of Master Sommeliers on the world of wine gives back to venues – and the off-premise – as well. “If you have a good knowledge of international wines, beers and spirits, you are in a much better position to recommend different things to your customer,” said Rob. “It also works as feedback to the winemaker; if customers prefer to drink a Chablis over an Australian chardonnay then winemakers need to adapt what they are doing to fit in with demand.” And finally, having a resident Master Sommelier not only lifts your reputation, but also the standards of your competitors. “There is a direct link between training and staff morale, job satisfaction, staff retention and profit – it’s just up to you how you manage it,” said Rob.

The facts

• Only three Australian sommeliers have achieved their Advanced Certificates; Franck Moreau from Merivale, Patrick White from Otto and Daniel Wegener from Quay.
• This year’s program was conducted by three visiting Master Sommeliers; Brian Julyan (UK), Evan Goldstein (US) and Cameron Douglas (NZ).
• 115 candidates participated in the two day Introductory Sommelier Course in 2010, with a pass rate of 73 per cent.
• A further 54 students went on to do the challenging Certified Exam, with 34 achieving the highly regarded accreditation of ‘Certified Sommelier.’

How to apply

Applications should be made through the Australian website; www.mastersommeliers.com.au. The website contains detailed information on the course and recommended reading. Introductory courses cost $500 (including GST); the Certified Level is $400 (including GST).

Master of Wine and Master Sommelier – what’s the difference?

A Master of Wine program is based on a more academic form of knowledge measurement. It is theoretical and is usually undertaken by writers, winemakers and other members of the trade. A Master Sommelier diploma focuses more on the practical side of fine wine and general beverage service. Testing includes tasting, theory, practical and also encompasses spirits, beer, cigars and global wine knowledge. Both are well-respected titles in the liquor industry.