



Pay it forward

WORDS MISHA WILKINSON

In any conversation with Cameron Douglas, New Zealand's first and only Master Sommelier (MS), you'll frequently hear him use the expression "pay it forward". It's one of the philosophies of the Court of Master Sommeliers (CMS) and it's certainly something Douglas embodies in spirit and commitment when mentoring students around the world and sharing his vast wine knowledge. Misha Wilkinson reports.

In many respects a Master Sommelier is a more elite qualification than a Master of Wine (MW) if you consider that worldwide there are only 197 Master Sommeliers versus 301 with an MW designation. So what's the difference between the two? Douglas says, "In terms of sacrifice and time, they are the same. MWs are the commentators on the world of wine, whereas an MS is the person on the ground who deals with the customer across all beverages, and who builds wine and beverage programs directly suited to establishments and their clientele – Master Sommeliers build interesting wine lists."

After Douglas completed the first level of the MS program in Las Vegas, he was inspired to embark on the full challenge because of the inspiration and encouragement he received from others who had completed the program. "There was lots of willingness to help, so for six and a half years I moved forward through the four-level program to eventually qualify as an MS in 2007," he explains. "There's a lot of sacrifice along the way – there's a lot of disappointment along the way. Failure is part of the journey." In fact it took Douglas four attempts to pass all three components in the final set of exams, requiring a

substantial investment in wine purchases for practice tastings, many trips overseas to sit the exams, not to mention the huge personal commitment in terms of time and focus. Finally, not only did he pass his exams in London, but he was also the highest scoring candidate, winning the Laurent Perrier Grande Siècle Trophy. As Douglas says, "Overcoming failure allows you to approach the journey a different way."

Douglas keeps himself busy in New Zealand as senior lecturer at Auckland University of Technology where he runs the beverage program at the School of Hospitality and Tourism. He is also consultant to the hospitality sector, providing anything from staff education to management advice, he writes columns for various magazines as well as his own blog, is a regular on many New Zealand and overseas wine judging panels, and this year will add the Sydney International Wine Competition to his judging schedule. On top of that he spends a lot of time in the USA, clocking up seven visits last year, along with trips to Shanghai, Thailand and Australia with much of his time taken up with mentoring, speaking engagements as well as being an instructor and examiner for the MS program.

Spreading the word

“My self-appointed job in the US is to take the message of New Zealand wine to as many sommeliers as I can,” he explains. He’s been visiting the USA for 15 years. During that time he has taught at the International Culinary Centre in San Jose, lectured at the CIA (Culinary Institute of America) and continues to be part of the examining team for CMS. He’s even held tastings for the sommelier team he’s been mentoring at The French Laundry in Napa – one of the most famous restaurants in the US. More recently New York has been on his schedule where he’s been consulting to an exciting new restaurant in downtown Manhattan.

He agrees that as part of his mentoring role as an MS, he has a great opportunity to talk about New Zealand wines. So what do US sommeliers think of New Zealand wines? “Generally they’re surprised as to the consistently high quality of the wines they’re encountering from New Zealand,” he says. “But

they’re ready to embrace varieties other than Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir. The somms that ‘get it’ tend to be the ones that have visited New Zealand and realise the depth and potential – so they’re looking for something different, but of course they will always list New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc.

“I’m seeing an increase in listings of Pinot Noir in the US – the smaller producer is becoming more noticed in the market, but of course they’ll always be competing with the bigger brand names.” Reassuringly, Douglas also says, “I think even the New Zealand commodity wines that have been exported over the past few years have been OK in terms of quality, and I’m talking about the supermarket wines. They haven’t hurt the reputation of New Zealand wines to the extent that, say, Australia’s commodity brands have with the negative effects of Yellow Tail. Although I think Wine Australia is trying to reinvigorate Australian wines and I think they are about to go through a revolutionary change in the US.”

Pleasing palates

In terms of what’s working for New Zealand in the on-premise sector and what opportunities may lay ahead, Douglas says, “Central Otago has significant traction in the market. You say *Central Otago* to sommeliers overseas and they know what you’re talking about. Central Otago is a much stronger brand for Pinot Noir, but Marlborough Pinot Noirs at the higher end are nipping at the heels in terms of presence in the market. Premium Central Otago Pinot Noir is much more available than Pinot Noir from Marlborough, but there’s great potential for Marlborough Pinot Noir in the Northern Hemisphere, so producers in Canterbury and Otago need to keep their focus on quality,” he warns. He believes there is more potential in Central Otago than just Pinot Noir and sees opportunities for Riesling and Pinot Gris if managed well. “In New Zealand there are a lot of producers who produce a lot of Pinot Gris and there is lot of mediocre Pinot Gris. Pinot Gris from Central Otago has the potential to be a leader in that variety,” he says.

Earlier this year at the Pinot Noir NZ 2013 extravaganza in Wellington, Douglas spoke about the newest wine region in New Zealand, the Waitaki Valley. Wines from this region, located in the South Island between the North Otago and Canterbury provinces, have been winning international awards and certainly attracted some attention during the Pinot Noir event. “It has the potential to be a very exciting region, but it’s never going to be big in terms of volume and choice of producers,” says Douglas. “But when you have winemakers like Grant Taylor and Jeff Sinnott making wines from there, the potential is realised.” Since Douglas gave his presentation, the biggest producer, Pasquale, has decided to pull out of the region. Like many other producers there, they have been constantly fighting a climatic battle trying to grow grapes, and as Douglas says, “the region is at the coolest end of cool.”

And what does he think about New Zealand’s number one exported variety? “In the US there are some on-premise places looking for the ‘next expression’ of Sauvignon Blanc. I’m excited by the newer expressions – the alternative styles which



have skin contact, lees stirring, wild ferment and so on. The throttle of barrel-ferment character that you used to get out of, say, Cloudy Bay Te Koku, has been pulled back and people are being more judicious with their oak program and that's working for Sauvignon Blanc," he explains. "Sauvignon Blanc out of Central Otago is a different kind of wine – I think that is exciting too. In some respects, we are impatient in New Zealand – we want to be ingrained in the wine psyche of the US now, whereas it took Italy and France hundreds of years to build their reputation. We behave like Gen Y when it comes to wanting our wines under the noses and on the palates of people *now!*"

Stand and deliver

What would Douglas like to see in the future? For a start, he'd like to see more Australian wine companies visit New Zealand. "Australian wine companies are not utilising the talent in New Zealand to increase the sales of their brands here. Simply put, they would increase their sales here if sommeliers here knew more about Australian wines," he says. This is timely advice from Douglas given the increasing chatter recently about New Zealand's share of the Australian wine market (which we've pointed out in previous stories to be only a third of the size of Australia's share of the NZ wine market.)

Douglas also says, "I would love to be able to be the 'go to' guy in New Zealand for people who want wine lists created, embellished, upgraded ... internationalised. I'm in a unique position to do that, so I'd like to be able to offer more of that to more companies."

Douglas also wants to continue to help people with their wine knowledge. Since attaining his MS qualification seven years ago, he has mentored people from South America, the USA and Europe. "It's an informal process of encouraging budding Master Sommeliers and helping them with their studies," he says. And if anyone wants to learn more about wine and asks for his help, he says his response is, "I'd be thrilled to help you out." And he means it. "The one thing I enjoy the most is connecting people with wine," he adds.

For anyone considering embarking on the MS program Douglas will certainly encourage them but he'll also warn about the level of commitment required. Commitment is something Douglas has in spades – both to his profession and to paying it forward. ■

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