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SOMMELIER EDUCATION AND CERTIFICATION: THE CASE OF MACEDONIA

Dejan Metodijeski

Goce Delcev University, Faculty of tourism and business logistics, Stip, Macedonia
dejan.metodijeski@ugd.edu.mk

Georgi Michev

Goce Delcev University, Faculty of Agriculture, Stip, Macedonia
georgi_asenov.micev@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract: Hospitality industry is a rapidly growing phenomenon and shows economic benefits in most countries worldwide. Food and beverage are the largest elements of the hospitality industry where main focus is the customer service and satisfaction. Well educated and trained personnel is one of the factors for development of hospitality industry and broad tourism sector. Sommelier is a person responsible for all aspects of wine service as well as food and wine pairing at a restaurant, a well-trained and experience wine professional who has passed certification. The subject of this paper is sommelier education and certification in Macedonia. General characteristics and definition of sommelier, following by historical development of sommelier, connection between sommelier and other fields like viticulture and enology, health, culture and marketing are explained in the paper. Education and certification of international sommelier organizations as well as those in Macedonia are presented in the text. For the purpose of paper, we use research methodology and secondary data sources by consulting relevant literature and analyzing training programs of official educational and sommelier institutions. The paper concluding remarks are regarding the potentials and opportunities of sommelier education and certification in Macedonia.

Keywords: sommelier, wine, education, Macedonia.

DEFINING THE SOMMELIER PROFESSION

A sommelier is a specialist and expert in wines who is responsible for their offering, serving and combining with food in the catering facilities by giving advice to the clients. The dictionaries related to tourist literature define the term sommelier as a person who is in charge of serving wine in a restaurant [1], a waiter who serves wine at a restaurant [2]. The sommelier is a person in charge of the wine in the restaurant, who takes care of the wine cellar in the restaurant and gives advice to the customers related to combining wine and food [3]. In its resolution [4], the International Organization of Vine and Wine defines the sommelier as a professional in the sphere of viticulture, wine-making, catering (restaurants, wine bars), wineries or other distribution channels that recommend and serve food and drinks on a professional level. According to the Academy of Food and Wine Service, the sommelier should recommend to customers wine that suits the food they choose, the reason they came to the restaurant and the budget they have. The sommelier profession is one of the most prestigious professions in the world, and it basically refers to [5]:

- study and research on the origin, composition, quality and properties of wine, its production and storage;
- offering and serving wine in an adequate manner and properly combining food for the customers in catering facilities, during special events, tasting, etc.;
- knowledge of the qualities and properties of special alcoholic beverages such as cognac and whiskey, as well as cigars.

The tasks of the sommelier also include compiling a wine list (card) and controlling the adequate amount of wine in the restaurant. When the restaurant has its own wine cellar, the sommelier takes care of its maintenance and the proper storage of wines. In many restaurants, owners or managers have full confidence in the sommelier who makes the selection and procurement of the wine. For this reason, the sommelier should have accumulated knowledge related to the processes of grape growing and wine making, the quality of harvests and wines, the careful selection of distributors or winemakers, and the research and study of new types of wines that come out on market. The sommelier is an employee at the restaurant where he/she presents the wine list, makes the best combination with appropriate food and wine, serves the selected dishes and drinks in a professional way by using appropriate inventory.

A study conducted in 250 restaurants in the United States gives us the following data on the sommelier profile [6]: on average, the sommeliers who were interviewed have worked in this area for 15 years, they retained the same position for 8 years and almost all the respondents participated in the selection of wines for the wine list. Three quarters of the respondents - sommeliers had full responsibility and freedom in terms of the selection of wines and

forming the price of the wines in the restaurant. More than 60% of the sommeliers received on-the-job training by more experienced fellow sommeliers. In the course of the week, sommeliers spend an average of five hours using the Internet for work and research. The average age of sommeliers is 41, and most of them, i.e. 83% are men.

Over time, the sommelier, working with people of different ages and professions, acquires more skills, manages to anticipate the mood of the customers, and is often able to determine their social status and condition. The sense of humor and creativity are his/her „assistants“.

The sommelier can contribute to the financial gain of a prestigious restaurant, and also, very often, the image of the restaurant itself rises to a higher level if the sommelier is highly skilled. It is an absolute must for the sommelier to also master the wine tasting technique, and it is very important that the sommelier has knowledge of foreign languages, especially French, because French is the language of wine, and English so that he/she is able to communicate with foreign customers.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOMMELIER PROFESSION

The sommelier profession is directly related to wine which is an alcoholic beverage obtained by fermenting grapes. There are plenty of historical data pertaining to the consumption of wine dating from ancient times until the present day, referring to various occasions, celebrations and, in some cases, also as a part of religious rituals and beliefs. Wine consumption has a long and rich centuries-old tradition for humanity, while the consumption process itself has always involved people who have attended to the cultivation, production and serving of wine. Therefore, the initial forms of serving wine and the sommelier profession may be discerned as early as in ancient times.

There are written sources regarding the usage of the term and the job of a sommelier since the medieval times, but we do not have any data as to the description of the working tasks. According to the Petit Robert dictionary, in 1316, the word sommelier was defined as a person responsible for the dining and the food products in a house or a facility, while in 1812 it was defined as the person responsible for the cellar and the wines in restaurants [7]. The French word *echanson* is used as a synonym and it was used to refer to the persons that brought the wine and beverages to the first French kings. The sommelier profession as an activity and the term sommelier were encountered for the first time in the dictionaries from XVII century, in which the foundations of this job are defined [8]. In terms of etymology, the term sommelier originates from the French word ‘sommier’, which means a person responsible for the pack animals, i.e. the cattle that pulled the cart with the food and the beverages [9]. Through the years, this concept underwent an alteration of its meaning, whereupon it also came to comprise people who attended to the serving and presentation of wine.

The sommelier profession as we know it today dates from XIX century, when the sommeliers were initially introduced in the well-known restaurants and then also in the hotels. Until the 60’s and 70’s of the previous century, this profession went through a major bloom, to be followed by a period in which the sommelier profession was stagnant due to the economic crisis only to develop again later on, thus responding to the needs of the profession. On the territory of former Yugoslavia, in the hotel operations the personnel that was in charge of serving wine in a uniform compulsorily wore a silver chain with a pendant, while an emblem of a vine leaf was embroidered on their coat [10]. The sommelier profession requires a lot of dedication and time and that is why most of the sommeliers become actual wine connoisseurs only after having reached a mature age.

The first publications related to the sommelier profession are located at the beginning of the XIX century [11]. The sommelier profession appears as a term with several authors from this period (such as, Henderson, 1824) [12], who write about the history of wine since the ancient period until the modern days, with a focus on the wines that were consumed during that period. In the existing scientific literature related to the sommelier profession, there are numerous authors elaborating this topic. In the course of the last 200 years, most of them come from French and Italian speaking countries. Over the last few decades, there has been a marked increase in the number of published expert literature editions related to the sommelier profession in English [13-18]. Since 2008 onwards, for the needs of the sommelier profession, the magazine *Sommeliers International* has been created, in which articles are published pertaining to this topic. In addition to this magazine, also in the magazine titled *Decanter* adequate information related to wine and the sommelier profession may be found, as well as in the *Wine Advocate* magazine and on the webpage *Wine Spectator*.

From a historical perspective, the first sommelier association was established in France in 1907 and it was called Union des Sommeliers. In Italy, the Sommelier Association was established in 1965. The world renowned International Council of Master Sommeliers was established in 1977. All these associations have certified programmes and courses which the candidates interested in becoming sommeliers should successfully complete in order to obtain a sommelier diploma. These programmes have been designed in such a manner so as to comprise all

required competencies, knowledge and skills which would be necessary to the sommelier, while in a part of the training programmes the basis is learning a friendly manner of conduct and impeccable service for the guests [19].

RELATION OF THE SOMMELIER PROFESSION WITH THE OTHER INDUSTRIES

The sommelier knowledge is versatile and it is wrongfully deemed that such a job is very basic and limited to wine serving [20]. The sommelier is responsible for the entire concept of the hospitality facility and he/she is directly linked to the food and beverages. The sommelier sells wine, performs procurements, provides advice, combines food and wine, compiles the lists of dishes and the wine card and attends to the entire inventory and equipment necessary for the proper serving of food and wine. Furthermore, the sommelier continuously upgrades his/her knowledge, manages the facility, shows an understanding for the guests, provides advice regarding the proper combination of food and wine, educates the guests regarding the significance of wine and plays the role of a mentor for the other employees. In addition to wine knowledge, the sommelier should also possess knowledge pertaining to other alcoholic beverages, as well as cigars.

In addition to the above activities, the sommelier sometimes organizes and conducts wine-related events in order to increase the wine sales in the catering facility and to contribute to the enrichment of the program [21]. The basic knowledge of the sommelier creates a broad spectrum and defines the specificity of this profession. The knowledge that the sommelier should possess includes different areas that are interconnected and cannot be overlooked such as: viticulture, winemaking, aspects of knowledge of tourism and hospitality, and other aspects of which the most important are health, law, economy, culture etc.

First, the sommelier has knowledge of viticulture, cultivation of vineyards, varieties of grapevine, quality control of grapes, etc. Then, the sommelier has knowledge of winemaking related to the technological processes of wine production, types of wines, wine regions, sensory analysis of wine, filling and preserving wine, etc.

Knowledge of tourism and hospitality is of paramount importance for the sommelier. The sommelier should have knowledge of the essence of the tourism industry, world tourism trends, international associations and organizations related to tourism and hospitality, and the like. The psychology of tourists and guests, communication with them, preparation and composition of food, combining food and wine, tasting and serving of wine, catering inventory, sommelier uniforms and equipment (spirals, wine trolleys, wine glasses, wine holders, wine corks, decanters, cold stores, shelves), management of catering facilities, wine and culinary tourism are among the most important aspects of the knowledge of the sommelier. A well-trained sommelier has a professional approach to the guests, and his main task is to help the guests in choosing the appropriate wine for a selected meal. As a professional, the sommelier will not bring the guest in an awkward situation by correcting his choice or wrong pronunciation of the name of a wine, especially if the guest is in company, for example, with business friends or a lady. In many good restaurants, the sommelier carries a special emblem, oftentimes it is an embroidered golden bunch of grapes on their shoulders, or a recognizable uniform, and sometimes a large key chain or a small silver tastevin.

The health-related knowledge of the sommelier is found in the proper nutrition and consumption of wine, the healing properties of wine, the correct combination of food and wine, etc. From legal aspects, the sommelier should know the wine-related legislation, the European and world regulations of importance for winemaking, tourism and hospitality. The sommelier extends his/her knowledge through monitoring the national strategies for the development of viticulture and winemaking, hospitality, etc. From the economic point of view, the sommelier should have knowledge about the pricing, knowledge of wine markets, procurement, sales, marketing, accounting, etc. The cultural knowledge is in conjunction with the history and anthropological importance of wine, wine and food in traditions, the philosophical aspects of wine, the organization of events related to wine, social conditions in the country, etc.

INTERNATIONAL SOMMELIER ORGANIZATIONS, TRAININGS AND CERTIFICATION

There is a large number of associations and NGOs in the world that are professionally established by sommeliers. There is almost no wine producing country in the world that does not have a local, regional or national sommelier association, The developed countries have multiple national associations and they join in unions, for example the Spanish Sommelier Association Union. In addition to the European sommelier associations, there are also associations on other continents (Asia, America, etc.), as well as World Sommelier Association.

Table 1. Selected sommelier organisations in the West Balkan countries

Country	Association	Official website	Year of establishment
Serbia	Serbian Sommelier Association	sommelierserbia.com	2003

Montenegro	National Sommelier Association of Montenegro	sommelijericg.weebly.com	2009
Bosnia and Herzegovina	/	/	/
Albania	Albanian Sommelier Association	sommelier.al	2005
Macedonia	Sommelier Association of Macedonia	/	2015
Kosovo	/	/	/

Source: The official websites of the sommelier organisations

A review of selected sommelier organisations in the West Balkan countries is given in Table 1. We can see in the table that there are established sommelier organizations in the West Balkan countries (except in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) that have their websites where information on the sommelier profession and wine, wine related events, educational and wine tours for the wine lovers, tour guides for wine tourism, tour guides and wine routes, sommelier trainings and certification, sommelier job positions, novelties in the wine industries, news related to the sommelier profession, national and international competitions, etc., can be found.

Association de la Sommellerie Internationale is an organization established in 1696 in France by four countries founders. This non-governmental organization with its seat in Paris was established relatively lately, having regard that the sommelier profession appeared in the 19th century. More than 75 countries worldwide are members of this association. The purposes of the association are as follows:

- Bring together and unite the national sommelier associations (only one per country) and promote their establishment where there aren't any;
- Coordinate and undertake activities in the direction of development and promotion of the sommelier profession via various training activities, etc.;
- Improve the sommelier profession and educate the clients;
- Defend the ethical principles of the profession.

Court of Master Sommeliers is an educational organization established in 1977 to encourage the standards for food and beverage service, particularly in the part of wine and food pairing. In 2017, 229 persons in the world acquired Master Sommelier diploma (the highest level) via the education process of this organization. It was established in Great Britain by institutions such as the Institute of Masters of Wine, the British Hotels & Restaurants Association, the Wine & Spirit Association of Great Britain and other entities in the area of tourism, hospitality and wine industry. Currently, the organization has opened subsidiaries and it organizes trainings and certification in Europe, Asia, the USA and Australia.

The Council has four levels of certification with increasing level of difficulty and complexity. The candidates who will pass a certain level will obtain a certificate, a badge and shirt buttons on the day when they have passed the course, i.e. the level.

The first level, which is called Level I – Introductory, is intended for all candidates with experience of several years in the restaurant business and it encompasses two day trainings with an exam with multiple answer questions and it often has high passing rate of candidates. The topics covered here are winemaking, types of grapes, wine regions, wine and food pairing, basic knowledge of beer, sake and liqueur. By passing the first level, the candidates do not obtain the professional title of sommelier.

The second level is called Level II – Certified Sommelier and it is intended for those candidates who passed the first level and it covers material related to serving wine and elaborating the knowledge in the world of wine. The exam for this level has three parts: A theoretical test, a written test with tasting of four wines (two types of red and two types of white wine) and serving. The minimum acquired points for successful passing of this course is 60%, and in the USA, 66% of the candidates pass this course. After passing the second level, preparation of the candidates in duration of one to two years is recommended for the next level.

The exam for the third level or Level III – Advanced Sommelier can be taken only if the candidate completes a three-day advanced level. This course is organized twice in the year, in spring and in autumn, and the candidate must submit an application and fill-in a questionnaire. The focus of the material being studied in this course is put on serving and wine makers. The examination of this level is organized three times per year. The exam consists of a written test, tasting of six wines in 25 minutes and a test for serving wine in duration of 45 minutes. The minimum acquired points for successful passing of this course is 60% for each part of the test separately.

The fourth level is Level IV – Master Sommelier and it can be taken by candidates with a minimum of 10 years of work experience in the profession, passed third level and an invitation or a recommendation. The exam covers wide

range of aspects in the wine industry, beer, spirits and cocktails, as well hospitality from serving aspects to managerial and philosophical aspects of the profession. The exam has three parts: a theoretical part, tasting and evaluation of wine (“blind tasting”) and serving. These three parts are taken in a period of three years. The minimum acquired points for successful passing of this course is 75% for each part of the test separately. Statistics show that only 3-8% of the candidates pass this level, and in certain years, only one candidate out of 70 applicants passes the last level. The tests that will not be passed can be taken again within a period of three years. So far, only nine persons have passed this level at the first try.

EDUCATION AND CERTIFICATION OF SOMMELIERS IN MACEDONIA

The world trends related to the sommelier profession arrived much later in Macedonia, and as an example for this conclusion serves the fact that the Sommelier Association of Macedonia was established in 2015. In addition to this association, there is another association in Macedonia registered as an Association of Citizens Wine Connoisseur and Professional Sommeliers of Macedonia – Sommeliers Skopje.

In Macedonia, the occupation of sommelier is not defined, but there are occupations such as wine assessor and wine taster [22]. In Macedonia, the sommelier profession is in the early stage of development, despite the rich tradition of breeding and production of wine in these areas. The sommeliers in our country are few in number, and one of the few international wine judges is Ivana Simjanovska, who is also a well-known wine blogger, wine fairs organizer, contributor in the hospitality magazine *Barcode*, and author of the Guide to the Wines of the Republic of Macedonia [23], published in 2011 and 2015 as an electronic edition. In addition to these guides to the Macedonian wines and wineries, two more guides are published in our country. In 2011, a guide to the Macedonian wineries was published [24], and the author Beleski in 2014 developed the edition dedicated to the wines in Macedonia [25]. The guides intended for wine tourists have been published in several countries in the world by well-known publishers, such as Dorling Kindersley [26], Frommer’s [27], Lonely Planet [28] and others.

As far as the certified programs are concerned, there is no program in Macedonia for training sommeliers. There is a program which partly meets the needs of the sommelier profession and it is approved by the PI Center for Adult Education, and the trainings are held in the Training Center “Shato Kamnik” in Skopje. The program is called – Wine Advisor, and interesting is the fact that this program is certified and belongs in the agricultural and veterinarian profession, and not in the hospitality and tourism profession. The program is intended for training professionals who will acquire knowledge from all areas of winemaking, beginning from viticulture and terroir, through the process of production, marketing, wine communication and the hospitality sector, including wine tourism. Part of this program is intended for the participants to acquire skills of presentation, proper serving, wine protocols, assessment, describing wine with the appropriate terminology and wine and food matching and acquire knowledge of the domestic and world wine market through familiarization with the most important wine regions in the world, as well as information about the use of social media in the world of wine.

The situation with the sommelier profession in the formal education in Macedonia is similar to that of the informal education. There are 11 secondary vocational hospitality schools, and in two of them there are hospitality technician streams in which the subject sommelier profession is included. In the country, there are six universities and faculties where tourism and hospitality are taught, but only the Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics at the Goce Delchev University in Shtip offers curricula in which the subject sommelier profession is included.

CONCLUSION

The research for the purposes of this paper shows that, in the world, the sommelier profession as an educational process is mostly implemented in the informal education in the form of organized courses by the sommelier organizations and associations. Also, there is a significant number of higher education institutions that offer sommelier trainings. The most famous educational institution in the field of gastronomy “Le Cordon Bleu” that opened in 1895 in Paris, also offers training for sommeliers. One of the rare examples of studying the sommelier profession as a faculty stream (as a subject it is taught as parts of the curricula in universities around the world) is the University on Orebro - Sweden, where there is a stream called Sommelier – Culinary Arts and Meal Science, which necessitates three-year studies for which 180 ECTS credits are awarded.

In recent years, the popularity of wine in Macedonia has increased, and as an argument for this notion we can state its presence in the media and the increased number of organized wine salons and wine manifestations. We can mention Vinskop, as one famous manifestation, which has been held since 2007. The television series and magazine “Food and Wine”, that have been present on the Macedonian market in the last ten years, have largely popularized the different types of wine and wine and food matching. The tv show “Wine Mosaic”, that is shown on MRT1 in

coproduction with Medi Advertis Grup, Skopje also greatly contributed to the familiarization of the domestic public with the wine industry in the country. The popularity of wine in its own right has resulted in the creation of curricula related to the sommelier profession in the formal and informal education in Macedonia.

From the aspect of the presence of the sommelier profession in the Western Balkan countries, a proposal may be made for the creation of a Sommelier Association, joint educational programs, fostering and promotion of local wine varieties, joint offers of wine and performance on international markets, organization of sommelier competitions etc.

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