

You're a what?

# Sommelier

by Kathleen Green



Wherever he goes at work, Shayn Bjornholm carries 15,000 bottles of wine. Not the physical bottles, of course; that would hardly be practical. But as a sommelier, Shayn does carry around a usable knowledge of the 1,350 selections—15,000 bottles in all—composing the restaurant's wine cellar.

A sommelier (soh-mel-YEA) is skilled in the art of matching wine with food to augment the food's flavor. With their specialized training and fine-tuned palates, sommeliers serve as restaurants' wine experts and share this expertise with restaurant guests. "My job is to demystify wine," says Shayn, "while still honoring what a fantastic food pairing it is."

At Seattle's Canlis Restaurant, Shayn's first goal in offering his assistance to guests is to put them at ease. He might initiate conversation without mentioning wine, chatting instead about topics like the weather or the guests' interests. After establishing a rapport, he eases the discussion toward what the guests will be eating for dinner. The talk gradually shifts from food to wine.

Still, before suggesting a wine to complement their menu choices, Shayn seeks input from the guests. He asks about the kinds of wine they enjoy, what their favorites are, and whether they want something that is similar to—or different from—those preferences to accompany their meal. He also asks whether they have in mind a price range.

Based on information that the guests provide, Shayn proposes three selections at various price levels. And, much to the surprise of some wary diners, his suggestions won't strain their budget. "I undershoot," he says. "When guests ask for a \$100 bottle, for example, I may go for one that's \$85. Never, ever, ever, do I try to up-sell."

Shayn can suggest complementary wines from various price ranges because he knows what's on the menu and in the restaurant's wine cellar. That's because consulting with the chef and stocking the cellar are another realm of the sommelier. Shayn reflects on the restaurant's menu,



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Kathleen Green is managing editor of the *OOQ*, (202) 691-5717.

which changes seasonally, when deciding what to buy. But he updates the 54-page wine list weekly because of rapidly changing inventory.

Public relations, marketing, and education related to wine are part of a sommelier's job, too. Among Shayn's activities in this arena are wine-tasting dinners that he coordinates. Each dinner showcases wine from a different domestic or international region. "They're hard work, but a lot of fun," Shayn says of the dinners. "Tasting is just a blast for me."

Tasting wine is, obviously, an essential part of whetting the sensitive palate that a sommelier needs to differentiate among the many nuances of wine. While much of that ability may be innate, however, some is the result of training. Several organizations offer programs that lead to sommelier or wine-related certification. Instruction usually includes courses in grape varieties and characteristics, wine production, sensory evaluation, food and wine pairings, and service techniques. Because tasting wine, an alcoholic beverage, is required during training, program participants must be of legal drinking age.

Other than the age requirement, there are no prerequisites in the United States for becoming a sommelier. But, realistically, a sommelier without credentials is not likely to find a job. Shayn has a sommelier diploma from the International Sommelier Guild, an organization for which he now teaches. He also has a higher certificate from the Wine and Spirits Education Trust and recently passed the advanced-level examination from the Court of Master Sommeliers.

The Court of Master Sommeliers' advanced exam is the intermediate stage of a three-level process for becoming a Master Sommelier. The title of Master Sommelier is an elite designation held by only 112 sommeliers worldwide, including 56 in the United States. According to the Court of Master Sommeliers, earnings vary widely—from about \$28,000 for a sommelier with limited experience to \$80,000 to \$160,000 for a Master Sommelier. But because there are no restrictions on assuming the general title of sommelier, there are no other reliable employment or earnings data available. The Bureau of

Labor Statistics does not collect data on sommeliers.

Shayn developed an interest in wine and fine dining after earning a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia.

Photos of Shayn Bjornholm and restaurant wine cellar by Matt Dahlgren

Gaining experience in restaurants, he recognized the importance of enjoying the work as a career instead of merely doing a job. "You have to love the art of dining," he says. "You have to believe there's a grace and an art to it."

By the time he moved into restaurant management, Shayn concluded that his job would have to focus on wine if he wanted to continue in the restaurant business. He pursued sommelier training and worked under an experienced sommelier at Canlis Restaurant before assuming the top job there. In 2002, Shayn was named Sommelier of the Year by the Washington Wine Commission and the Seattle Times Company. "This is a really, really fun job," he says. "It's really fun to get out there on the floor and get people excited about wine."

Providing sommelier services and selling wine on the restaurant's floor account for about 35 percent of his work, Shayn estimates. Tasks related to stocking the cellar, such as ordering, purchasing, and inventory upkeep, take up another 35 percent. Marketing and public relations duties, including teaching, fill the remaining portion.

Except for his classroom teaching, Shayn spends most of his working hours at the restaurant. Sommeliers are employed primarily in high-end restaurants, which provide a comfortable job setting. Whether out on the floor or stocking the cellar, however, sommeliers work hard and are on their feet most of the time. If you're a morning person, cautions Shayn, you'll have to either reset your body clock or consider another line of work. "Make sure you like to work at night. It affects your entire life," he says. "You're not going to find a daytime sommelier job. It just doesn't exist."

For Shayn, the tedium of receiving and recording shipments is the worst part of the job. But having basic computer skills, including knowing how to set up and read spreadsheets, makes it more manageable. Some business knowledge—for determining cost-related issues such as pricing and profit margins—also is helpful. Shayn cites people skills, an empathic nature, and an excellent palate as being important as well.

The most rewarding part of a sommelier's job combines those last qualities. "When I see that light go on in guests' eyes when they like something I've recommended, especially when they're skeptical—that's phenomenal," says Shayn, "I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't believe wine is the ultimate pairing with food." 