

The First Generation



of American Masters

Island sommeliers named to Guild

In the entire United States, there are just four Class A members of the Guild of Sommeliers of London, England; and three of them are in Hawaii. In this photo, Dean of Hawaiian Sommeliers Gene Richards pins the shield of the Guild on Trattoria's Ed Osterland, as Richard Dean of Pearl City Tavern looks on. The presentation ceremony was held at Serge Battistetti's Trattoria Restaurant. Richards has been a member for a number of years; this is the first year for Dean and Osterland in the world-renowned Guild.

It took a while to conquer Mount Everest; nearly a dozen expeditions failed between 1922 and 1953, when Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay finally made it to the summit. The first American Master Sommeliers must have known how those mountaineers felt: not only did they have to pass a notoriously grueling three-part test, then administered by the Guild of Sommeliers, but they had to overcome the disadvantages of preparing essentially without peer support, an ocean away from the Guild's headquarters in London. There were no intermediary stages to boost their confidence—only a hell-bent, go-for-broke assault on an examination designed primarily for their overseas colleagues.

Although the number continues to inch upward, only 211 individuals have earned the MS title since it was first awarded in 1969. The Court of Master Sommeliers was formally established in 1977 as an institution for the British wine trade, sponsored by The Vintners' Company, The

Institute of Masters of Wine, the British Hotels and Restaurants Association, The Wine and Spirit Trade Association, and the Wholesale Tobacco Trade Association. The Napa, Calif.-based American chapter (now the Court of Master Sommeliers, Americas) was founded in 1989; to date, 134 North Americans have been inducted into the Court, accounting for more than half the Master Sommeliers in the world. I asked four of the first American Masters to share their stories in this roundtable discussion.

Edmund A. "Eddie" Osterland and Richard Dean were both working as *tastevin*-wearing sommeliers in Honolulu when they first heard about the Master Sommelier examinations. After traveling extensively and working at restaurants in Europe, Osterland became the first American-born applicant—and among the first 25 in the world—to attain MS certification, passing the test on his first try in 1973. Since then, he has enjoyed a long, successful career as an educator and colorful speaker, currently as the

principal of Osterland Enterprises in La Jolla, Calif.

It took three long journeys between Honolulu and London before Dean finally attained the Court in 1975, at the then-unheard-of age of 26. Equally amazing is that after all these years, he remains a devoted restaurant sommelier. Dean spent most of his 44-year career working in Hawaiian hotels before taking positions at The Mark Restaurant and Tavern on the Green in New York City; since 2007, he has presided over the wine program at Taj Campton Place in San Francisco.

When sommeliers say the name "Fred," they are invariably referring to Frederick L. Dame, who in 1984 became the 44th MS in the world. Dame began his legendary career as cellar master of The Sardine Factory in Monterey, Calif. He was the first American to serve as president of the Court of Master Sommeliers Worldwide, and he helped establish the American chapter. While personally



mentoring more American Masters than anyone else may ever do (as documented by Jason Wise in the new film *SOMM*), he has also applied his leadership and communication skills in positions with Constellation Brands, Allied Domecq, Seagram Chateau & Estate Wines, Treasury Wine Estates, Beam Wine Estates, and American Wine & Spirits, where he is currently vice president of prestige accounts. Dame lives in San Francisco.

Ronn Wiegand became the fifth American-born Master Sommelier (52nd in the world) in 1986, nailing all three sections of the exam in England on his first shot; like Dame, he earned the Krug Cup for achieving the highest score that year. He is one of four Master Sommeliers who are also Masters of Wine (along with Gerard Basset, Doug Frost, and Eric Hemer), having earned the MW in 1991. Wiegand, too, has Hawaiian ties; in the late 1970s, he worked with Osterland at the Grape Escape wine school in Honolulu. After moving to Napa Valley, he launched the influential *Restaurant Wine* newsletter in 1988. He continues to publish from his residence in Tokaji, Hungary, where his wife, Hajnalka Prácsér, is part of the family that owns the Erzsébet Pince winery.

San Francisco's David O'Connor, who achieved MS certification between Dame and Weigand in 1985, was unavailable for this virtual roundtable; the others answered my questions by e-mail.

RANDY CAPAROSO

Caparoso: *How did you learn about the Master Sommelier examinations?*

OSTERLAND: I read about it in the *Wine Butler*, which at the time was the newsletter for the Guild of Sommeliers in London. While I was attending grad school [in psychology], I was working as a sommelier at the Ilikai Hotel in Honolulu. I liked the idea of attaining the highest level of the profession so much that I set a personal goal of going all the way to London and doing whatever it took to pass the exam.

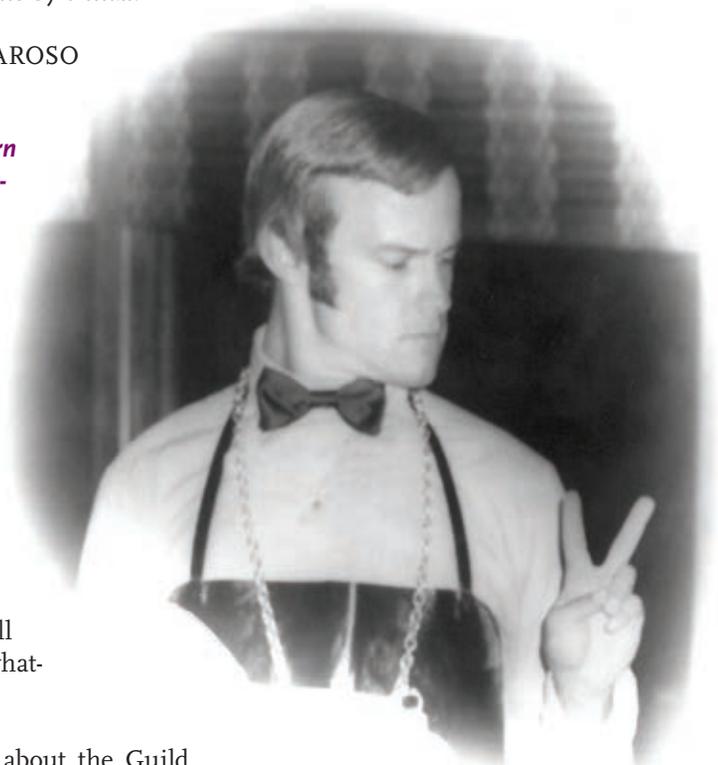
DEAN: Like Eddie, I first read about the Guild of Sommeliers in the *Wine Butler* back in 1971,

when the two of us were sharing a house near a beach in Honolulu. I was also working as a sommelier while attending the University of Hawaii. This was a very colorful pamphlet, more like a brochure, carrying ads for things like Dry Sack Sherry and Blue Nun. It was directed at the restaurant- and hotel-wine trade in England, not in the United States, but that wasn't going to stop us.

DAME: I learned about the Court of Master Sommeliers through an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

WIEGAND: I first heard of it through the late Raoul Sofer at the Carnelian Room in the Clift Hotel, then San Francisco's leading luxury hotel, where he was running probably the best wine program in the city. Sofer was an Austrian native who became an MS in 1971. At the time, I didn't have a full idea of what being a Master Sommelier was about—only that in the fine dining world, the title meant you were tops in the profession, even a little bit of a celebrity. In 1975, I went to work at the Clift as a server; Sofer found out I had an intense interest in wine and immediately offered me the position of assistant sommelier, which I accepted. I worked with him for a year. During that time, he explained to me about the exam and the Guild of Sommeliers, and he en-

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Eddie Osterland in 1968.

couraged me to become a full-time sommelier. It was also through Sofer that I was first introduced to Eddie, who visited the hotel while passing through California.

How did you prepare for your exams?

OSTERLAND: I saved money for about a year and moved to France, where I attended the University of Poitiers to learn French. A year later, I enrolled at L'École d'Oenologie of the University of Bordeaux to attain the Diplôme Universitaire d'Aptitude à la Dégustation des Vins. When I graduated, I took the position of head sommelier at the Hôtel de la Poste in Beaune. During my three years in Europe, I visited every wine region in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Finally, I went to London to sit for the exam, and I passed all three parts in 1973. It took a few days to peel myself off the ceiling afterward!

DEAN: Learning about wine, especially in Hawaii, was not an easy thing back then—there were no computers, of course no Google, and no books to help you prepare for tastings. I had some advantages working in a restaurant, but wine selections at that time were nothing like what we have today. We did have some wine clubs, attended by some other interested Hawaiian sommeliers. The only real way to learn, though, was to travel to Europe, visit the châteaux, meet winemakers, and taste as many wines as you could.

After Eddie and I read about the Guild in the *Wine Butler*, I took a copy to show the general manager at the Hawaiian Regent Hotel, where I worked. He loved it and offered to help me with my expenses. The plan was to go to Europe, spend a month studying in the vineyards, and then go to London to take the exams. I also got a lot of help from wine importers who arranged visits for me. When I got to Burgundy in 1973, I met up with Eddie, who was then at the Hôtel de la Poste in Beaune. After only a year and a half in France, Eddie was already speaking fluent French!

In October 1973, I sat for the MS at Vintners' Hall in London and passed Restaurant Service, called Practical today. But I had to go back to Hawaii and tell my friends and people I worked for that I did not pass the other two parts. One thing was for sure: I spent the next year avoiding the GM who'd had so much faith in me in the beginning. In 1974, I went back to Europe and spent two more months in vineyards, and that October I passed Theory—but I still didn't pass the tasting. I had to go back one more time, in October 1975, before I finally aced it.

DAME: At least I had the use of a small red book that outlined what to expect during the examination. I continued to taste as often as possible and read the books listed while working the floor at The Sardine Factory.

WIEGAND: My exams were held in 1985 and 1986, nearly a decade after I'd left the Clift Hotel. During those intervening years, I visited more than 300 wineries in California and Europe at my own expense, worked as assistant manager at a company that ran some of London's leading wine bars, and joined Eddie at the Grape Escape in Hawaii. I had also published dozens of articles in publications like *Decanter*, *Wine Spectator*, and *Wine Country*, and in 1980 I moved to Napa Valley.

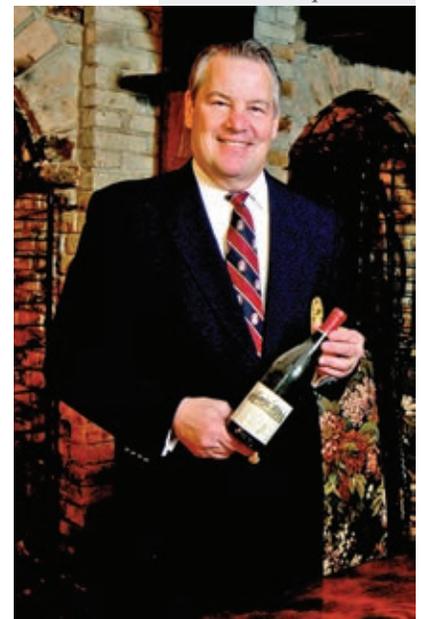
In my case, preparation for the exam was tricky because it was held only a month after my Advanced, which didn't give me a lot of time. Complicating the issue was the fact that during the month between the two exams, my ex-wife and I moved out of our apartment into a new house, and I had deadlines for several wine articles I was writing. On top of that, there were serious time-zone adjustments: both exams were held in England, so I made two round-trip flights from California to London in a one-month period. That may not seem like much today, but back then it was a bit of an adventure, highly unusual for an aspiring Master.

After all this time, is there a moment from your exams that stands out in your memory?

WIEGAND: For me, it was moving into that first house in late December 1985—studying upstairs for the Master's, which was to be held less than two weeks later, while my wife watched over our two toddlers and set up our new household downstairs.



Richard Dean at the now-defunct Third Floor Restaurant in Honolulu, circa 1972.



Fred Dame today.

Photos courtesy of Richard Dean (top), Fred Dame (bottom)



Ronn Wiegand today.

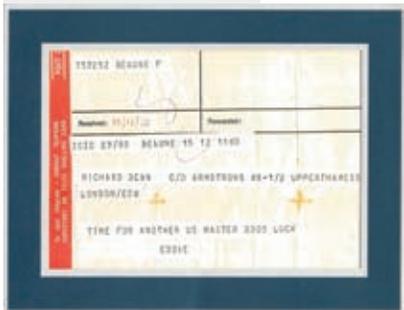
DEAN: What I remember was the hardest part for me, which was the tasting—the same as today’s, with six glasses of wine, totally unknown, blind. The second time I sat for it, in 1974, I thought I knew most of the wines they put in front of me, but I was a nervous wreck. I remember flying into London the night prior. Big mistake—the change in time zone and climate was too much to overcome before an exam like that. The following October, in 1975, I spent an entire week in London before the tasting, acclimating myself. This time I knew I would nail any wine they put in front of me, and I did. I was also told that, at 26, I was the youngest Master Sommelier in the world at the time.

OSTERLAND: My most memorable moment was in 1975, dashing out of service at the Hôtel de la Poste to a post office to send a telegram [pictured below] to Richard in London, wishing him luck. He had already taken the exam twice and was back for his third try. My message was, “Time for another U.S. Master.” When he finally passed, I was so happy for him—and happy to see another American Master Sommelier.

DAME: Winning the first Krug Cup was an amazing experience—especially since the other person who passed in 1984, Claudia Harris, had been named the U.K. Sommelier of the Year in 1983 and was the first woman to pass the exam. She was outstanding; it was an honor to compete with her and the rest of the candidates, many of whom are Master Sommeliers today.

How has the exam changed over the years since you took it?

DEAN: I have to say the entire exam is remarkably the same after all these years. It was three parts when I took it—theory, service, and tasting—and it still is today. All verbal, nothing written—there are lots of similarities.



OSTERLAND: The difference lies in the increased level of difficulty for not only the candidates but also the examiners. Although it’s been a long time since I was an examiner, I know it’s a challenge for the panel

of Masters assembling the questions. There was no Internet when we took it; now candidates know so many of the questions from prior exams that the challenge of constantly changing them and keeping the level of difficulty fair is daunting, to say the least.

How has becoming a Master Sommelier opened doors for you?

DAME: A thousand different doors have opened for me; phenomenal experiences have been shared and great relationships enjoyed since I passed. Most of all, I enjoy watching the successful growth of the American chapter.

DEAN: There is no substitute for the credibility and reputation you earn when you become a Master Sommelier.

OSTERLAND: I have had the good fortune to author two books: *Wine at the Bottom Line* for the National Restaurant Association (1980) and *Power Entertaining: Secrets to Building Lasting Relationships, Hosting Unforgettable Events, and Hosting Big Deals from America’s 1st Master Sommelier* (John Wiley & Sons, 2012). There is no question in my mind that being an MS brought these kind of opportunities to me. It is the greatest club I could imagine being a member of.

WIEGAND: It has provided an ever-expanding community of talented professionals as peers. It has definitely boosted my efforts as a journalist, consultant, taster, and lecturer. Most important, as the Court has grown in stature and reputation over the years, so, too, has the professional value of the MS diploma. Consequently, many more doors have opened to me now, 27 years later, than in the early years.

That said, we also need to acknowledge the time and effort of dozens of other Masters who have invested in the program—especially Nunzio Alioto and Fred Dame, who literally founded, organized, and oversaw the American Court of Master Sommeliers and did a superb job. There is also Brian Julyan, who has been the bedrock of the U.K.-based Court [now the Court of Master Sommeliers, Europe] for years.

What are the major differences between the sommelier profession of the '70s and '80s and that of today?

WIEGAND: Back then, sommeliers were extremely rare in the United States, found only in the highest-

Photo by Hyundai Magazine/Smarter Média Kft (top); photo courtesy of Eddie Osterland (bottom)

end restaurants. They managed the wine list, worked the floor, and reported to a beverage manager. It was an exclusive position. Today, wine is a restaurant staple in the United States. And because sales have increased so dramatically and vastly more establishments have excellent wine programs, the sommelier position has gone mainstream. I would estimate that there are now 40-50 times more active sommeliers in American restaurants than there were 40 years ago.

OSTERLAND: Back in the '70s, the position was usually a five-hour-a-night job. Customers who had no idea about wine would allow the sommelier to sample their purchases to verify their viability—tasting customers' bottles used to be the norm, if you can believe it. In France, though, sommeliers worked shifts as long as 12 or 13 hours. I have seen it all in the past 40 years, but sommeliers are still the people customers turn to, because they can add magic to the dining experience.

DEAN: Up through the 1970s, sommeliers were usually called "wine stewards," probably because it was easier to pronounce. There wasn't much more to the job than waiting for servers to take food orders and then approaching guests to suggest appropriate wines. The hours were similar to a server's, no more than six a day—which I think is good enough, because it keeps you polite and rested. Today, the sommelier is more likely to be responsible for an entire beverage program, including purchasing, and sometimes for the scheduling and management of staff. Each hotel or restaurant is different. After all these years, I still hold the position of a working sommelier, but now I work 10-12 hours a day!

DAME: I agree, the whole world has changed, and so has the job, which is that of a wine director more than a pure floor sommelier. There's been tremendous growth in our profession—a lot of it made possible by the commitment of Master Sommeliers to the Court in terms of organization, management, and mentoring. It has been amazing and gratifying to witness.

What more would you like to see from today's Master Sommeliers?

OSTERLAND: I try to raise their awareness of how much pleasure can be shared with those who haven't learned to enjoy wine thoroughly. I have done tastings at the Society for the Blind, for example, to show people without sight how they can develop tasting skills that few others possess. I enjoy speaking to seniors as well, teaching them fun ways to entertain friends. There are many diverse, appreciative audiences out there we can bring the pleasure of wine to.

DEAN: I would like to see Master Sommeliers give more back to the community in the form of charity events. With the MS title, you have access to many industry stars, including top chefs, and a lot of good can be done with that. Chuck Furuya, for instance, organizes a yearly event to help out the Lupus Foundation in Hawaii. Of course, this goes for myself as well—I'd like to do more than I've done in the past.

DAME: But how much more can you ask for? These are talented individuals giving their time to help the next generation. It's about dedication, respect, and professionalism—and I can assure you, no one is getting rich in this business.

Who are some of today's Master Sommeliers who you think should be emulated?

DAME: That's a tough one. Very few Masters have not contributed to the success of



Osterland today.

Dean at Taj Campton Place, San Francisco.



Photos courtesy of Eddie Osterland (top), Taj Campton Place, San Francisco (bottom)



New American Master Sommeliers inducted in February 2013: Christopher Tanghe, Emily Pickral-Papach, Carlton McCoy, and Christopher P. Bates.

the Court in one way or another. I salute Nunzio Alioto for his stewardship during the formative years. I also appreciate greatly the leadership of Jay Fletcher during his term as chairman, and the work of current education director Shayn Bjornholm.

DEAN: I applaud Masters like Tim Gaiser who have been so generous with their knowledge, helping out many young people. I recently spoke to some sommeliers Tim invited to his home for tasting; they were so excited—just a simple invitation makes a huge impact on them. Another Master who constantly helps out sommeliers working through their courses and exams is Catherine Fallis.

July 2013 inductee Nick Hetzel with fellow Master Sommeliers Shayn Bjornholm, Laura DePasquale, and Greg Harrington.



OSTERLAND: I think Christopher Miller at Spago Beverly Hills is doing a great job, epitomizing what a Master Sommelier is all about.

WIEGAND: I have to say that today's Master Sommeliers are doing an outstanding job all around. Those who enter our ranks tend to be extremely conscientious, proficient, and dedicated. To mention one name among recent Masters would implicitly dismiss 10 others who should be included and congratulated.

Any advice for today's working sommeliers, particularly those aspiring to the Court?

DEAN: I have always been incredibly lucky finding the right position, whether in a restaurant or hotel, and I love interacting with people. My advice to younger sommeliers is that if you enjoy this aspect of being a sommelier—providing one-on-one service and forming relationships—this is the business for you. That said, if you don't have the patience, you might consider another part of the wine business.

WIEGAND: The sommelier profession is a great one, and it's been an honor and a pleasure to be part of it. I would simply say: keep tasting, keep learning, keep sharing; be humble, be generous, be respectful, and always be appreciative.

DAME: Pay it forward. I always tell students I'm mentoring, "You owe me nothing except the next 'you,' and then we're even—but until then, there's a debt to be paid." And I'm happy to say I currently have little to collect on! 🍷

THE LATEST AMERICAN MASTER SOMMELIERS

The Court of Master Sommeliers, Americas, is expanding year by year. The most recent inductees, all of whom passed their exams in 2013, are:

- Christopher P. Bates**, general manager and executive chef, Hotel Fauchère, Milford, Pa.; co-owner, Element Winery, Arkport, N.Y.
- Nick Hetzel**, sommelier, Sage at Aria Resort and Casino, Las Vegas
- Carlton McCoy**, assistant wine director, The Little Nell, Aspen, Colo.
- Emily Pickral-Papach**, national sales analyst and wine educator, Chappellet, Napa, Calif.
- Christopher Tanghe**, wine and service director, Aragona, Seattle

Photos courtesy of the Court of Master Sommeliers