



**H**AVING GROWN UP IN SINGAPORE, TAN YING Hsien first became interested in wine as a university student in the UK.

“On my student’s allowance, I couldn’t afford gin and tonic,” he recalls. A resourceful student, he noticed newly opened wine merchants popping up that offered affordable drinks at wine tastings.

“I used to listen to some of the speakers even though I was initially just there for the booze,” he says. “I got quite interested over time—to the point where I became really geeky about it, writing up tasting notes for every wine I tried.”

Former corporate lawyer **TAN YING HSIEN**, now the first Singaporean Master of Wine, speaks with Brunswick’s **WILL CARNWATH** about his journey and the culture of wine.

A wine career wasn’t yet on his radar. Instead he became a lawyer in the corporate and banking world, including a long stint at Standard Chartered. That career lasted 20 years. It was in 2009 that he made the switch to wine journalist, speaker and educator. In 2015, he earned the internationally recognized Master of Wine title from the UK-based Institute of Masters of Wine. One of the first two Asian men to hold the distinction, he was the first and only Singaporean to do so. There are fewer than 500 MWs currently. Being accepted into the program, taking a full six years to pass the multiple elements of the course and earning the MW, he surprised himself.

“It was kind of crazy thinking I might be able to do that because I hadn’t done any formal training or qualification, and I wasn’t even involved in the trade at all—nothing on a professional basis. I didn’t really expect to get into the program. And for that matter, given my background, I didn’t expect to get the qualification.”

Now he sees his role as a communicator, he says, someone who has both an outsider’s perspective and a connoisseur’s understanding. In that role, he is the founder of the Taberna Wine Academy in Singapore. The interest in wine expertise in Singapore is growing, with three more MWs in the works and the number of sommeliers in the city-state exploding.

“Coming from being an ex-lawyer, I can’t stop talking,” he says. “So I just do that with wine, teaching people about it wherever I am.”

#### **What draws you to the communications aspect?**

I have always wanted to communicate an excitement and inspiration for the industry here—spreading the word, teaching people about wine. And not just for consumers, but sharing my knowledge, giving a little bit of my approach to wine tasting, and how wine professionals should behave in the wine industry. I’m not a winemaker. I came from a non-professional wine background. So hopefully I can talk about it in more approachable ways.

#### **Are there any other things that you see linking the worlds of law and wine?**

Having come from a legal regulatory background, I can see that it creates a bureaucracy, and then inflexibility, as with all bureaucracies. As a lawyer, I would

so often find myself trying to address issues with regulators and saying, “Does this really make practical sense?” and, “If the point of this rule is to do X, does it actually effectively do X?” That is what happened with wine authorities on so many occasions; there is a real feeling of both the sense and the nonsense of some of these regulations.

Some of the most wonderful changes happened when people broke the rules. For instance, our friends the Italians would admit they aren’t particularly good at following regulations. If they had just followed the rules, we would never have things like the super Tuscans—Tignanello and the rest.

I guess the difference with banking is that you can actually destroy people’s lives and livelihood—with wine, the only fortune that’s really going to be destroyed is the winemakers’!

#### **You’ve described becoming a Master of Wine as a pretty arduous journey. What was it that kept you going?**

Stubbornness. My Chinese zodiac is the Ox, and I think actually my character’s a little bit like that, I just keep plugging away at something until I get it.

I came close to giving up. I failed the blind tasting part of the exam—where you have to taste, describe and identify 36 mystery wines—three times. I was allowed more attempts, but if I hadn’t passed the fourth time, I’m not sure I could have gone on. By that time, it had taken the joy out of tasting for me.

#### **People often say don’t turn your hobby into your job or you will lose the passion.**

Having come through it, it’s actually been rejuvenating. It has awoken the whole passion for trying to communicate to people what they should be looking for in a glass of wine. The MWs I came into contact with during the course were so encouraging and helpful, it feels much more like a mutually supportive community than some sort of industry body.

One of the best, most timely lessons came from a serendipitous conversation with a chief examiner, John Hoskins MW. Basically, he was saying don’t get hung up on perfect identification—look at the questions and do the stuff you can do. It was then that the penny really dropped for me.

That tied in with something another friend and mentor, Jasper Morris MW, said. One of my friends asked him—what do you think Ying needs to do to pass the exam? He smiled and said, he’s got to stop intellectualizing the wine.

So that was lesson: To some extent, you have to just trust yourself and go with the flow.

## Matters of

# TASTE

**Do you find there are more Southeast Asians interested in becoming Masters of Wine now?**

Yes, for sure, with Jeannie Cho Lee being the first Asian to have qualified in 2008, she got a lot of coverage and interest in the region. That opened people's eyes to the possibility. When I became an MW in Singapore, I approached a couple of people in the trade, and encouraged them to try. So now we have three or four Southeast Asian students in Singapore alone. Two years ago, we had the second Singaporean MW, who now lives in the UK. Hopefully a third will qualify this year. So I'm actually very chuffed by that.

**What is your view on scores for wine, which seem to drive so much of the value?**

Often these scores are a distraction. It all stems from Robert Parker, who was trying to provide an independent view, but I think there was a misinterpretation of his scores. Much of it now is the media and some of the wine merchants turning scores to their advantage, not the critics themselves. Then of course the more nakedly commercial wine producers tried to follow that lead, and to make a style of wine rumored to get high Parker scores, so that whole thing drove increased production of this heavily extracted, fruity rich style, which works for things like Châteauneuf-du-Pape, but certainly doesn't work for everything.

You asked about the connection with my legal background—it's that the details count. If it matters to you, don't take other people's word for it, do the work, find the facts and form your own view. The influence of star reviewers is waning, and that's a good thing. On the other hand, with crowdsourcing apps like Vivino, there's a risk that consumers may be misled by ratings or opinions of inexperienced drinkers. You have to do your homework. There's really no substitute for developing a critical tasting ability, underpinned by some theoretical knowledge.

**Do you think the increasing role of the arts, culture, food and wine helps build Singapore as a global city rather than just a business hub?**

I think it matters. One of the things I wanted to do in promoting greater interest was to approach it from a consumer perspective but with a slightly more rigorous, structured understanding of what wine is all about. I wanted to develop Singapore as a regional center of excellence for knowledge and appreciation of wine and service. Twelve years ago, the number of sommeliers I could name who really knew their stuff was a handful in the whole country. Now there are 10 times that number. I judge the National Sommelier

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**WILL CARNWATH** is a Partner and Global Lead of Brunswick's Healthcare and Life Sciences practice, based in Singapore. A former senior investment banker, he spent a decade in corporate finance, focused on the pharma and medical devices sector. He has just completed his Wine and Spirits Education Trust Level 3 examinations.

Competition here from time to time. It's really good to see the quality and diversity that's coming up.

In Singapore, we have no agricultural base, so in a sense we are not so different from the UK 40 or 50 years ago, where wine was imported, not grown—although now that's changing. That was one of the reasons why the UK merchants and brokers were treated as being quite independent, because they were not wedded to their own domestic industry. And from that perspective, I think it's actually really good that Singapore can go in that same direction— independent and informed.

**How much would you say the wine industry is embracing the push to net zero?**

From a very cynical perspective, of course there is a temptation for the marketing department to exaggerate this stuff. Then there is the basis of measurement—until we agree on a common basis for measurement and a set of broadly applicable standards, it is going to open up the opportunity for exaggeration and manipulation. For now, I just try to look at producers themselves, how they are managing their vineyards so that there is minimal waste and using natural materials as much as possible.

But when you look at the bigger picture, I think a lot of the solution isn't in the vineyard, and less so in the winery—the really big changes need to be made in packaging and logistics. If we make it lighter, get recycling fully integrated and look at the environmental impact of how the wine travels, that's where the biggest gains are still to be made.

**How you would advise people to pair wine with some of the classic Singaporean dishes?**

I would firstly say, experiment. This is another area where people get very opinionated. It is very much a personal preference thing, but of course I have some favorites. Soups are especially difficult, but I would say Sherry works really well, and encourage you to try it. Even with spicy soups, an Oloroso or something with a little bit of sweetness like a Cream Sherry, can be delicious. When you have spice in a dish, not just chili spice, but aromatic spices, find something with a little bit of sweetness, or even just a sweet flavor. I would suggest perhaps a late harvest Alsace Pinot Gris with Bak Kut Teh or lobster noodles, or an Italian Recioto with beef rendang.

The acidity and toasty aromas of Champagne work brilliantly with lots of Asian food, especially if you can find one with a little more sweetness—sec or demi-sec rather than brut, although these styles are sadly harder to find these days. ♦