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Testing times: the untold story behind the Master Sommelier exam scandal

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Attica wine director Jane Lopes was stripped of her Master Sommelier title. *Photo: Simon Schluter*

Attica wine director Jane Lopes proved her mastery as a sommelier, only to have the recognition stripped away.

The [Master Sommelier exam](#) is considered the hardest exam in the world. It has a fiendishly low pass-rate, and since the first exam in 1969, only 262 people have passed the exam globally. (Well, there are currently 262 Master Sommeliers; 280 people have actually passed the exam – more on that later).

The Masters exam is the fourth and final level in a series of exams offered through the Court of Master Sommeliers. It is composed of three parts: an oral theory exam, a service portion, and a blind tasting of six wines in 25 minutes.

Candidates spend upwards of a decade, tens of thousands of dollars, and countless hours of study, practice and preparation to pass the exam. Once a candidate passes, they are a Master Sommelier for life (at least until recently – again, more on that later). There is no recertification, no further requirements for membership. One crosses immediately from mentee to

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mentor, from student to teacher, from candidate to Master.

New Masters are publicly celebrated, revered for their determination and skill, offered pay rises and new positions, asked to teach and educate, and immediately welcomed into a superlative realm of professional achievement.

I passed the exam on September 5, 2018.

It was easily the hardest week of my life. I once read a quote that you'll often look back on the hard times as being some of the most beautiful. These were not those times. The days leading up to, during, and after the exam were just plain miserable. I wasn't sleeping more than a few hours each night, my stomach was in constant revolt, and I wavered between bouts of panic attacks and crying spells. Mental and physical health problems had plagued me most of my adult life, tending to flare up in high pressure situations. Not easy to admit, and perhaps not "masterly", but...the truth.

Even after the exam was over – even after I was crowned a Master Sommelier – my mind and body hovered in residual panic. I still had trouble sleeping and eating for weeks after. While congratulatory emails, messages and calls rolled in, I had a hard time enjoying the post-pass glow. "How does it feel?! It must feel AHHHHHMAZING!" was the constant refrain. I would do my best to muster a believable, "Yes, of course, amazing!" all the while still trembling inside from the trauma of it all.

But at least I could take solace in the fact that it was over. I wouldn't have to endure a week like that ever again.

On October 10, everything changed. I woke up to a flurry of activity on my phone. I had a few texts from my then-fiance now-husband (who had passed the exam a year before me in 2017). And a missed call from a member of the Board of Directors of the Court of Master Sommeliers-Americas. But the first thing that caught my eye was a WhatsApp message from a friend in New York: "What's going on with the CMS, are you still a Master Sommelier??"



Lopes: 'Oddly enough, I do look back on these hard times as being beautiful.' Photo: Wayne Taylor

I checked my email and found a media release from the Court, stating that, due to "clear evidence that a Master breached the confidentiality with respect to the wines presented for tasting", the results of the tasting portion of the 2018 Master Sommelier exam were to be invalidated. All newly minted Masters who passed the tasting portion in 2018 would have to take and pass it again.

I read the media release over and over again, tears streaming down my face. I wasn't in disbelief that cheating had occurred. I was in disbelief that the Board would take this course of action.

I got on the phone with my Board liaison and bombarded him with questions. What was the rush? Why was I not notified personally before the media release went out? Is there really no possible way to investigate and find out who was involved and who wasn't? Would the same action have been taken if a discovery was made about last year's exam or the year before? Or were we deemed more expendable because we had only been Masters for five weeks? Do they really think every Master Sommelier can pass this exam every time? What stigma will be created if we don't pass the retest? Will the assumption be that we cheated? How am I supposed to tell people what is happening – people who have offered me opportunities based on my new credential? And am I still a Master Sommelier? When and how will that title be stripped?

I read the media release over and over again, tears streaming down my face.

He didn't give me any answers, and instead read off a script that had been given to him. The thesis, without any proof or reasoning to back it up, was that "this was the only way".

In the days to follow, one of these questions was answered. I was given written notice, per the bylaws of the organisation, that my membership in the Court was to be suspended in 30 days.

No other questions were addressed. Without any further information from the Board, our class began to collect some pieces of the puzzle ourselves. We discovered that an email had been written the morning of the tasting exam by a senior Master Sommelier, who was a member of the Board of Directors. The recipients were blind copied, but we found first-hand that there were three recipients, with rumours of one more. The email revealed the identity of two of the six wines in the blind tasting exam: a pinot grigio and a Chateauneuf-du-Pape.

The Board stated publicly that they had received the information about the breach on October 5, 2018. They also stated that they made their decision concerning the invalidation of the exam and the subsequent stripping of titles on October 8. And, somewhere in there, they claimed thorough investigation and painstaking deliberation took place. All the decades of dedication that led to those credentials being achieved were cast aside in three days and two Board meetings.

The Board did not claim there was any evidence to suggest that the confidential information went beyond the recipients of the email. But for whatever reason – and I have my theories – the Board had decided that a retest was the only option, never mind the cost to the organisation, the dangerous precedent set, and the harm to those who lost their pin.



Put to the test: Jane Lopes. Photo: Simon Schluter

Our class was dragged through waves of internal and public doubt. I had to watch as my name was plastered in the Australian media, with headlines like "Australia's First Female Master Sommelier in Cheating Scandal." Others in our group were pulled out of Introductory exams they had already signed on to teach. Yet others lost pending promotions and raises. The class of 2018 was immediately shoved back across the line, mastery stripped, and lacquered with a veil of suspicion.

In this time, I began to drink more heavily. I usually never imbibe during my work week, but in the first few weeks after the revelation, I needed something at night to dull the pain and numb my mind. Not easy to admit, perhaps not "masterly", but...the truth. I made myself a Manhattan most nights. I needed a drink that was strong, quick to make, and went down easy. I'd pour a couple fingers of rye whiskey in a glass, top it with about half as much sweet vermouth, dash in some Angostura Bitters, drop a big ice cube in, and skewer a few brandied cherries. (I still managed to be fancy even in my rush for a quick buzz.)

Oddly enough, I do look back on these hard times as being beautiful. With the help of my trusty Manhattan, I slept through the night. My stomach was at ease. The panic and anxiety that had surrounded the exam was replaced with anger and sadness. This may not seem like a good trade-off, but for someone suffering from half a lifetime of mental health problems, believe me,

it is. It's the difference between situational melancholy and systemic, chronic suffering. I'd gladly take the former.

I won't sit the exam again. The reasons are many, but ultimately, I was only able to make the sacrifices required to pass because I wholeheartedly believed in why I was doing it. In examining my reasons for taking the exam in the first place, I found several: to pursue excellence in my profession, to prove to myself that I could do it in spite of my particular challenges, and to be in a position to educate, mentor, and influence in the industry. I know now that I don't need the letters "MS" after my name to pursue the first, prove that I did the second, or be in a position to do the third.



Mastery, after all, is in the pursuit. Especially in the ever-changing world of wine, if you think you've achieved mastery, you've probably already lost it. The wine professionals whose careers I admire the most – pin or no – are the ones who are hungry. Hungry to keep learning more, achieving more, and – most importantly – keep spreading more love. True excellence and hospitality. That is what mastery looks like to me.

The qualification

- The Master Sommelier credential is the most prestigious and difficult accreditation a sommelier can obtain. Fewer than 300 people have passed the exam since the 1960s.
- Three other levels must be achieved – Introductory, Certified, and Advanced – before a candidate is able to take the Master Sommelier exam. The passing of each level is awarded with a pin that sommeliers are expected to wear on their lapel to signify this achievement.
- Candidates put in hundreds (if not thousands) of hours over the course of a year to prepare for the exam: book study, blind tasting, and service practice are all required.
- It takes most candidates several yearly attempts to pass all three sections of the exam (theory, tasting, and service). Only a small fraction of those who attempt ever achieve this outcome.

- The amount of money over the years that candidates spend preparing for and taking the exam – between the study materials, blind tasting practice wines, examination fees, plane flights, and accommodation – can be estimated to be upwards of \$10,000, and sometimes significantly more.

My Perfect Manhattan vs. A Perfect Manhattan

I've always resented the moniker "perfect" for an equal-parts Manhattan (recipe below). It's not my perfect Manhattan...

My Perfect Manhattan

60ml rye whiskey

30ml sweet vermouth

2 dashes Angostura Bitters

Stir on one large ice cube, and garnish with skewered brandied cherries (the more cherries the better).

A Perfect Manhattan

60ml rye whiskey

15ml sweet vermouth

15ml dry vermouth

1 dash Angostura Bitters

1 dash orange bitters

Stir on ice in a mixing glass; strain into a chilled coupe. Garnish with a lemon peel.

Recipes from Vignette: Stories of Life & Wine in 100 Bottles by Jane Lopes, published by Hardie Grant Books RRP \$40; illustration © Robin Cowcher 2019.

- [Jane Lopes' cheese and wine pairing suggestions](#)

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