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ALUMNI NETWORK

The Future of Wine & Spirits Education

From WSET to the Court of Master Sommeliers,
discover how education is transforming hospitality
in East Africa.

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INSIDE CAPSTONE CALIFORNIA

MEET THE
EDUCATORS
BEHIND THE
JOURNEY

'26 ISSUE 1



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Ronan Sayburn MS, CEO CMS Europe, Edouard Oger MS and Sjouke de Vries during our inaugural CMS course in East Africa

On the Cover:
Inaugural Capstone California course with the De Vries Premium Wines Team

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Learning Doesn't End with a Qualification



Over the past years, hundreds of students have joined HCC Africa to study wine and spirits. Today, our alumni work across hospitality and the wider beverage industry in Kenya and across East Africa.

With the launch of the HCC Africa Certified Sommelier & Beverage Professionals Network, we want to bring this group of professionals closer together and create more opportunities to continue learning. HCC Africa now offers several different learning paths.

WSET provides internationally recognised wine and spirits education, the Court of Master Sommeliers focuses on the knowledge, tasting and service skills of the sommelier, and programmes such as Capstone California give us the opportunity to study individual wine regions in more depth. Completing a qualification, however, should not be the end of the learning process.

Through the alumni network we will organise tastings, producer sessions and other industry events. We also want to connect alumni with other professionals, educators, producers and employers, and recognise the achievements of people working in our industry.

This magazine is part of that.

In our first issue, we speak with educators, alumni, employers and international industry professionals. We look back at the first Court of Master Sommeliers programme in East Africa, meet East Africa's first Certified Sommelier and explore California through the Capstone California programme.

There is always more to learn in wine and spirits, regardless of how long you have worked in the industry. We hope the HCC Africa network can become a place where professionals continue to learn from each other, meet people in the industry and stay connected.

Enjoy the first issue.

WSET More Than a Qualification



WSET shaping wine education across East Africa and why curiosity is the key to lifelong learning

Alexander De Cata (DipWSET), Senior Market Development Manager - EMEA, WSET

As WSET's EMEA Senior Market Development Manager, he works with educators and programme providers across Europe, the Middle East and Africa, helping expand access to one of the world's most recognised wine and spirits qualifications. Every market is different, every culture approaches wine differently, and every partnership brings its own opportunities and challenges. It is precisely that diversity, he says, that makes his work so rewarding.

"Every country is different, and they all have different needs," he tells us. "That's what makes the job fascinating. Sometimes you make mistakes, sometimes you think something will work and it doesn't, but that's how you learn."

It is a philosophy that seems to define both his career and WSET's approach to education: remaining curious, adapting, and continually learning.

From passion to profession

Like many people in the wine industry, Alexander's journey didn't begin with the intention of working in wine education. Instead, it grew from an appreciation of wine itself and, over time, a fascination with helping others understand it.

Today, his role goes far beyond supporting WSET Approved Programme Providers. He works closely with educators and partners across the EMEA region, identifying opportunities to grow wine and spirits education while ensuring programmes remain relevant to

each market's unique needs.

That means understanding local industries, recognising where education can have the greatest impact, and helping providers deliver courses that genuinely transform careers.

During our conversation, one thing became immediately clear: Alexander doesn't see WSET simply as an awarding body. He sees it as a platform that equips people with skills they can carry throughout their careers.

Education that goes beyond wine
When people think about WSET, they often think about learning grape varieties, wine regions and tasting techniques. Alexander believes that's only part of the story.

"People see the qualification," he explains, "but what they're also developing are transferable skills."

He describes WSET's learning journey as evolving with each level. *"Level 1 is about knowing. Level 2 is about describing. Level 3 is about explaining."*

That progression is intentional. Students don't simply memorise facts; they learn how to think critically, analyse information and explain why a wine tastes the way it does.

"We're constantly asking, 'Why?'" Alexander says. "Why does this vineyard produce this style of wine? Why does this winemaking choice matter? You're taking knowledge and applying it to reach an informed conclusion."



Those are skills, he notes, that extend well beyond wine.

Whether presenting ideas, solving problems or communicating with confidence, the ability to think critically remains valuable in any profession.

A partnership built on ambition

As our conversation turned to HCC-A, Alexander reflected on one milestone that stood above the rest. Without hesitation, he pointed to the launch of the WSET Level 3 Award in Wines.

“The Level 3 was a massive logistical challenge,” he recalls. “You’re talking about more than 80 wine samples and a significant amount of classroom time. It takes commitment from both the provider and the students.”

What impressed him most wasn’t simply that the programme happened. It was that HCC-A remained committed despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Sjouke and his team pulled it off because they believed in the value of making it happen,” he says. “Since then, you’ve continued delivering Level 3, and that’s fantastic.”

For Alexander, that commitment reflects exactly what wine education needs: partners willing to invest in long-term growth rather than short-term success.

Opening doors

One of the themes Alexander returned to throughout our conversation was opportunity.

He has seen first-hand how WSET qualifications have helped students around the world progress into new roles, new countries and entirely new careers.

“I’ve seen students begin with Level 1 and later continue their studies in places like Dubai or Singapore,” he says. “Those qualifications become

a passport. They open doors and give people the confidence to challenge themselves even further.”

He believes the same opportunities exist for students in East Africa. For hospitality professionals, investing in education isn’t simply about passing an examination. It’s about investing in a future that can take them anywhere.

Looking ahead

As WSET continues to evolve, Alexander is excited about making education even more accessible.

From the introduction of on-screen examinations to new specialist courses on topics such as sustainability, he sees these developments as ways of giving students greater flexibility while encouraging lifelong learning.



But regardless of how WSET grows, one thing remains unchanged. Quality education matters.

As our conversation came to a close, we asked Alexander how he would describe the future of wine and spirits education in East Africa.

He didn’t hesitate.

“The sky’s the limit,” he said with a smile. “With knowledge comes power. The potential is there, but education is what allows people to take advantage of it.”

It is an optimistic vision and one that aligns perfectly with HCC-A’s mission.

By making globally recognised wine and spirits education accessible to professionals across the region, HCC-A is not only helping individuals earn qualifications, but equipping them with the confidence, critical thinking and practical skills to build meaningful careers. Because, as Alexander reminds us, the journey is about far more than what’s written on a certificate. It’s about where that knowledge can take you.



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Building East Africa's Next Generation of Wine Professionals

Aloys Onchuru, WSET Level 1 & Level 2 Award in Wines Educator

For many people, wine begins with a bottle. For Aloys, it began with hospitality.

Working in food and beverage introduced him to the fascinating relationship between food and wine, but what started as a curiosity soon evolved into a lifelong passion. As he immersed himself in the world of wine through the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET), he discovered that every bottle tells a story, one shaped by geography, science, history, craftsmanship, and culture.

Today, as HCC-A's WSET Level 1 and Level 2 Wines Educator, Aloys is helping write the next chapter of that story by equipping East Africa's hospitality professionals and wine enthusiasts with the knowledge and confidence to appreciate wine beyond the label.

Closing the Knowledge Gap

Aloys' decision to become a WSET educator was driven by more than a personal passion. He recognised a growing enthusiasm for wine across East Africa, but also saw the need for structured, internationally recognised education that could support the region's rapidly evolving hospitality industry.

"WSET gave me a structured, global framework to understand wine," he explains. "I wanted to pay that forward."

Through his work at HCC-A, he has found an opportunity to do exactly that, building strong foundations for students who are beginning their wine journey while raising professional standards across the industry.

Where Confidence Begins

For many students, walking into their first wine class can feel intimidating. Wine has long been perceived as complex, exclusive, and filled with unwritten rules.

One of the most rewarding parts of teaching, Aloys says, is watching those misconceptions disappear.

He enjoys seeing students progress from feeling overwhelmed by a wine list to confidently discussing grape varieties, climate, acidity, and wine styles. Those breakthrough moments, when theory suddenly makes sense in the glass, are what make teaching especially fulfilling.

Rather than encouraging students to memorise facts, he helps them develop a common language that allows them to understand and communicate about wine with confidence.





Challenging Wine Myths

Every new class brings familiar misconceptions. Some students believe expensive wines are automatically better. Others assume sweet wine is somehow inferior, that darker bottles always contain fuller-bodied wines, or that every white wine should be served ice-cold. In Aloys' classroom, those assumptions are replaced with curiosity.

The focus shifts away from prestige and towards understanding structure, balance, style, and context, giving students the tools to evaluate wine objectively rather than relying on myths or marketing.

The Moment It All Clicks

Every educator knows the moment when learning becomes genuine passion. For Aloys, it often happens during comparative tastings.

He watches as students swirl their glasses, identify aromas without relying on tasting notes, and begin connecting what they smell and taste with what they've learned in class. Whether recognising green bell pepper in a Sauvignon Blanc or dried plum in a mature red wine, those moments signal something bigger than successful learning; they reveal growing confidence.

"When students realise they can systematically analyse a wine on their own," he says, "that's when they've truly caught the wine bug."

Education That Changes Careers

The impact of WSET qualifications extends well beyond the classroom.

Over the years, Aloys has seen former students progress into leadership roles as head sommeliers, oversee beverage programmes in leading hotels, and join prominent wine importers and distributors across East Africa.

An internationally recognised qualification, he notes, gives graduates a valuable competitive advantage in an increasingly sophisticated hospitality industry.

A Growing Wine Culture

As East Africa's dining, hospitality, and tourism sectors continue to expand, Aloys believes formal wine education has never been

more relevant. Today's consumers are increasingly interested in understanding what they're drinking, while hospitality professionals are expected to deliver knowledgeable, world-class service. Wine education, he believes, benefits both groups by raising industry standards and helping cultivate a stronger, more informed wine culture throughout the region.

The Joy of Teaching

Among the many memorable moments in his career, one remains especially meaningful.

Watching a class where five students achieved distinction was a proud milestone, but what stood out most was seeing one particularly quiet student confidently deliver a complete wine analysis.

For Aloys, moments like these capture the true purpose of education, not simply passing examinations, but helping individuals discover confidence in themselves and their abilities.

Advice for Future Students

For anyone considering their first WSET qualification, his advice is refreshingly simple: Just begin.

Level 1 and Level 2 are designed specifically for newcomers, providing a structured pathway that builds knowledge step by step. An open mind, curiosity, and a willingness to challenge preconceived ideas are far more important than previous experience. The skills gained, he believes, will last a lifetime.

A Passion That Never Stops Growing

Even after years of studying and teaching wine, Aloys remains inspired by its endless evolution.

Every vintage offers new lessons. Every region presents a different perspective. Every producer and grape variety has another story waiting to be discovered. But above all else, he believes wine's greatest strength lies in its ability to bring people together.

As long as there are stories to share around a table, and students eager to discover them, his passion for wine will continue to grow.



From Curiosity to Confidence

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Edwin (Edwine) Njoroge, WSET Level 2 Award in Wines – 100% Pass Rate

Some people discover their life's passion early. Others stumble upon it when they least expect it.

For Edwin Njoroge, better known in the wine community as Ed-wine, the journey has been anything but conventional. Before becoming an award-winning sommelier, he was a professional gospel dancer during Kenya's Groove Awards era, later worked as a nail technician, and eventually found himself waiting tables in hospitality.

Looking back, Edwin smiles at the twists and turns that brought him here.

"I always felt something was missing," he says. "When I discovered what a sommelier was, everything suddenly made sense. It combined hospitality, education, service, travel, culture, and continuous learning all the things I love."

Today, Edwin serves as Head Sommelier at Wine & More in Diani, where he does far more than recommend wines. He trains restaurant teams, hosts wine tastings, advises guests on pairings, and shares his knowledge through online wine education sessions. For him, education has become just as important as service.

"I believe wine should be understood, not just consumed."

That passion translated into remarkable success when he enrolled for the WSET Level 2 Award in Wines through HCC-A. Unlike many students, Edwin didn't simply hope to pass. He aimed for perfection.

"My mentor had scored 96%, and I challenged myself to go one better," he recalls. "When my director asked what I expected, I simply said, '100%.'"

Behind that confidence was months of disciplined preparation. Edwin transformed his workplace into a classroom, spending countless hours studying among more than 800 bottles of wine. He created comparison tables linking grape varieties, climates and regions, practised mock examinations, and tasted wines whenever possible to reinforce what he had learned.

Receiving a perfect score was more than an academic achievement. "It represented discipline, consistency and faith."

Yet perhaps the biggest transformation wasn't the certificate itself. *"WSET completely changed my perspective. Before, I simply enjoyed wine. Today, I understand why a wine tastes the way it does."*

That deeper understanding has changed the way he serves guests. Instead of recommending the most popular bottle, Edwin now begins by understanding the guest sitting in front of him.

"What are they eating? What flavours do they enjoy? What kind of experience are they looking for?"

Those conversations, he believes, create memorable dining experiences while making wine feel approachable rather than intimidating.

His ambitions, however, stretch far beyond Diani.

Edwin dreams of travelling to vineyards across the world, completing the WSET Diploma, earning the Certified Sommelier qualification, and one day pursuing the coveted Master Sommelier Diploma. Closer to home, he hopes to establish a wine academy that will inspire the next generation of African wine professionals. His personal motto says everything about the journey he hopes to create for others:

"Passion... I pass it on."



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Ryan on Elevating Spirits Education in East Africa



The journey into spirits began behind the bar.

Ryan Duvenage, WSET Level 1, 2 & 3 Award in Spirits Educator

What started as bartending during his university years soon grew into a career spanning marketing, operations, and education within the global beverage industry. Along the way, one thing remained constant, a passion for learning and helping others discover the remarkable world of spirits.

That passion eventually led him to the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET), where his work with the Diageo Bar Academy across Africa opened the door to formal spirits education. From completing his own WSET qualifications to travelling to India to earn his Level 3 Award in Spirits, Ryan has dedicated his career to sharing knowledge with students across the continent. Today, he leads HCC-A's WSET Level 1, and Level 2 Award in Spirits programmes, inspiring a new generation of hospitality professionals in East Africa.

Revealing the Depth of Spirits

Ask Ryan what he enjoys most about teaching, and his answer is immediate: changing perceptions.

For many people, spirits remain one of the least understood categories in the beverage world. While wine and beer are often familiar territory, spirits can seem intimidating, with countless styles, production methods, and misconceptions.

Ryan believes education is the key to unlocking that complexity.

One of the most rewarding moments in the classroom is watching students connect the production process, from raw materials and

fermentation to distillation and maturation, with the aromas, flavours, and textures they experience in the glass. It transforms spirits from a mystery into a fascinating subject of study.

A Landmark Moment for HCC-A

One of Ryan's proudest achievements came in 2024 when he led HCC-A's inaugural WSET Spirits programme.

Every student successfully passed the course, a milestone that reflected not only the quality of teaching but also the dedication of the class itself. The cohort consisted largely of experienced hospitality professionals, including sommeliers, bar managers, and retail specialists. Their enthusiasm, curiosity, and strong sensory skills created a dynamic learning environment where thoughtful discussions and shared industry experiences enriched every session.

For Ryan, it was a reminder that passionate students are at the heart of exceptional education.

A Changing Spirits Landscape

Africa's spirits market continues to evolve, and Ryan sees exciting opportunities ahead.

While recent years have been defined by the growth of premium and luxury spirits, he believes the future will also see increasing demand for products that combine quality with accessibility. At the same time, changing consumer habits, particularly among younger drinkers, are reshaping the way people engage with spirits.



Rather than remaining loyal to a single category, consumers are increasingly moving between premium spirits, ready-to-drink beverages, low- and no-alcohol alternatives, and craft brands depending on the occasion.

Ryan believes these shifts present an exciting opportunity for authentic local producers and emerging craft distillers to connect with consumers seeking quality, value, and distinctive brand stories.

Beyond the Bottle

One of the biggest surprises for new students is discovering just how diverse the world of spirits really is.

Unlike wine, which is studied as a single category, spirits encompass multiple categories, each governed by its own production methods, regulations, geographical influences, and traditions.

Even tasting presents a unique challenge, as evaluating higher-alcohol spirits requires a different sensory approach and a well-trained palate.



It is this combination of technical knowledge and sensory skill that makes spirits education both demanding and deeply rewarding.

Meeting the Expectations of Modern Hospitality

As hospitality continues to become more sophisticated across East Africa, Ryan believes education has become essential rather than optional. Today's guests arrive with greater knowledge, higher expectations, and an appetite for meaningful experiences. Whether dining in a fine restaurant, staying at a luxury hotel, or visiting an elite cocktail bar, they expect recommendations that are informed, engaging, and authentic.

Professionals equipped with internationally recognised qualifications such as WSET are increasingly well positioned to meet those expectations, giving both businesses and their guests greater confidence in the service they receive.

Looking to the Future

Although international qualifications remain a significant investment for many aspiring professionals across Africa, Ryan is optimistic about the future.

He expects brand-led education to continue introducing newcomers to spirits, while formal qualifications steadily become more valued as employers increasingly recognise the difference they make. Similar trends have already transformed hospitality industries in parts of Asia, and Ryan believes East Africa is well on the same path.

As more professionals invest in structured education, the region will continue building a stronger, more knowledgeable beverage community.

Building Strong Foundations

For anyone considering a career in the spirits industry, Ryan's advice is simple: never stop learning.

Whether your ambition is to become a bartender, brand ambassador, marketer, distiller, or educator, success begins with understanding the fundamentals.

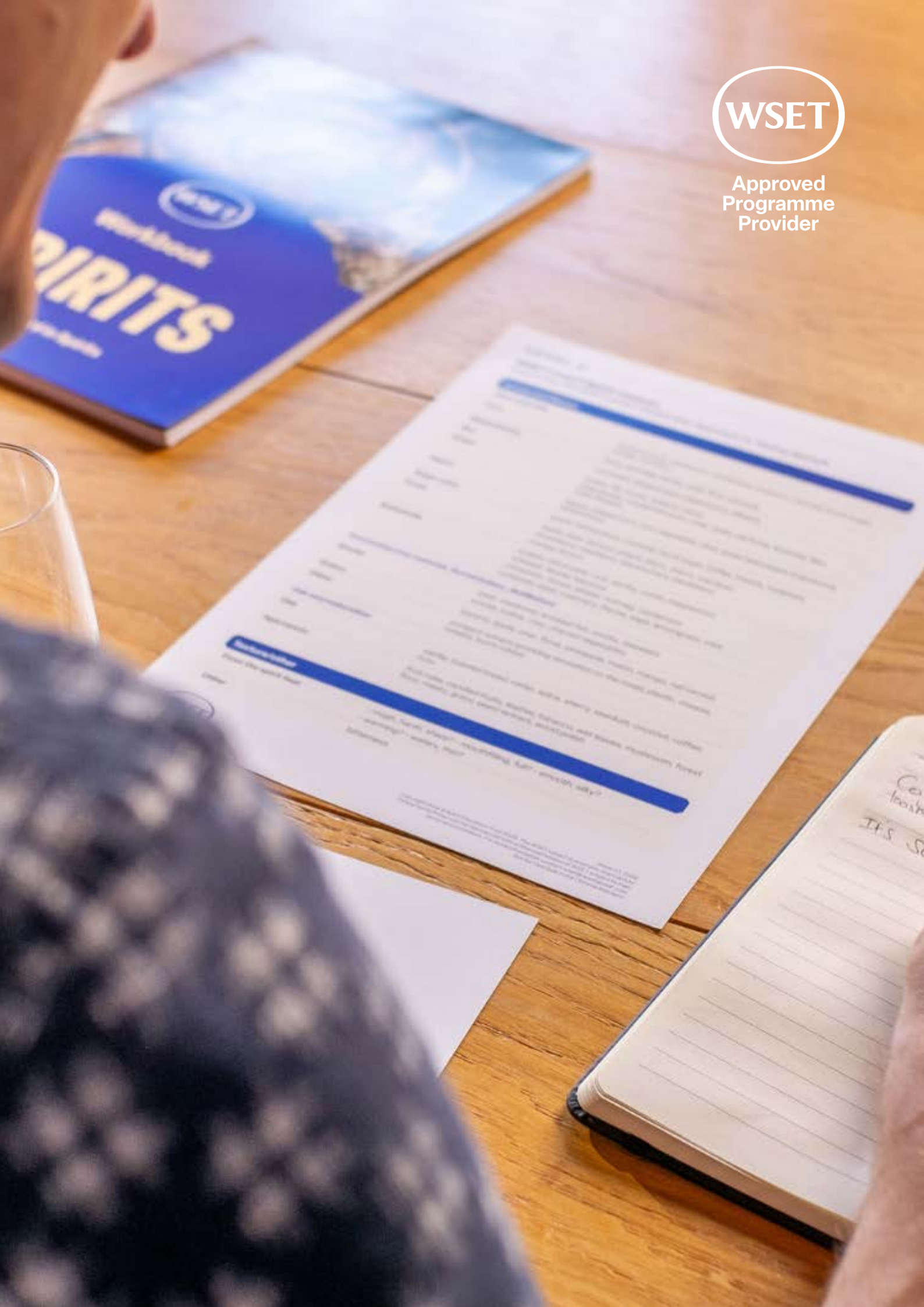
A solid grasp of raw materials, fermentation, distillation, and maturation provides the framework for understanding every spirit category and evaluating the countless brands and styles encountered throughout a career.

"Build strong foundations," Ryan encourages. "Everything else becomes easier from there."





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Investing in People, Elevating Hospitality: Dion's Commitment to Wine Education

Behind every confident recommendation, memorable guest experience, and knowledgeable conversation about wine is an investment in education. Few organisations understand this better than Dion Wines & Spirits East Africa, where employee development has become a cornerstone of business success.

For Teresia, HR & Admin Manager at Dion, people are the company's greatest asset. Her role extends beyond recruitment and administration to creating an environment where employees are encouraged to learn, grow, and build meaningful careers.

"We are committed to continuous learning, career progression, and creating opportunities that empower our team to grow both professionally and personally," she explains. "By investing in our people, we are ultimately investing in the long-term success of our business."

Building Expertise That Creates Better Experiences

As one of East Africa's leading wine and spirits companies, Dion recognises that today's customers expect more than simply purchasing a bottle of wine.

Consumers increasingly seek knowledgeable guidance, thoughtful recommendations, and confidence that the person serving them understands the product.

That belief inspired Dion's decision to partner with HCC-A and integrate WSET qualifications into its staff development strategy. For Teresia, the goal was never just to improve product knowledge. It was to develop trusted advisors, professionals capable of adding genuine value to every customer interaction through internationally recognised education.

More Than Product Knowledge

While WSET qualifications provide a comprehensive understanding of wine styles, regions, production methods, and food pairing, Teresia believes their impact reaches much further.

The programme develops qualities that are essential across the hospitality industry: confidence, professionalism, critical thinking, and effective communication. These skills not only strengthen individual careers but also enable employees to deliver more engaging, personalised experiences for customers.

Confidence That Customers Notice

The results of Dion's investment have been tangible.

Since employees began undertaking WSET qualifications, Teresia has witnessed a remarkable transformation in the way her team engages with customers.



Teresia Kariuki, HR & Admin Dion Wines & Spirits East Africa

Staff approach conversations with greater confidence, ask more insightful questions, and make recommendations that are tailored to each customer's needs. Beyond improving service, the training has fostered a culture of collaboration, continuous learning, and pride in professional development throughout the organisation.

Education as a Business Strategy

For Dion, education is not viewed as an expense; it is one of the company's most valuable long-term investments.

Employees benefit through expanded knowledge, increased confidence, stronger career prospects, and the reassurance that their employer believes in their potential.

The business, in turn, benefits from higher service standards, improved sales performance, greater customer trust, and a workforce committed to excellence.

As Teresia puts it, skilled and engaged employees remain the driving force behind sustainable business success.

Raising Standards Across East Africa

With hospitality and tourism continuing to grow across the region, Teresia believes continuous learning has never been more important.

Consumer expectations continue to evolve, international trends move quickly, and hospitality professionals must keep pace if they are to remain competitive.

Formal wine education equips teams with the knowledge and confidence to deliver service that meets international standards while encouraging innovation, professionalism, and a culture of excellence.

A Partnership Built on Shared Values

Dion's collaboration with HCC-A has played an important role in achieving its learning and development goals.

Through experienced educators, internationally recognised qualifications, and a structured learning environment, HCC-A has helped Dion strengthen its internal capabilities while providing employees with credentials respected around the world.

For Teresia, it is a partnership built on a shared commitment to developing talent and raising industry standards.

Shaping the Future of Hospitality

Looking ahead, Teresia believes organisations that invest in structured wine and spirits education will be better equipped to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving industry.

As East Africa continues to gain international recognition as a hospitality destination, knowledgeable professionals will become an increasingly important competitive advantage.

By investing in education today, businesses are doing more than strengthening their own teams; they are helping shape the future of hospitality across the region.

Asked to summarise the impact of WSET training on Dion's team, Teresia's answer captures the philosophy behind the company's commitment to learning:

"Empowering people, elevating expertise, inspiring confidence, and delivering exceptional hospitality."





A comprehensive knowledge of the Worlds best producers is crucial for Sommeliers.

HCC AFRICA ALUMNI NETWORK

LEARN. CONNECT. PROGRESS.

Learning doesn't stop in the classroom. The HCC Africa Certified Sommelier & Beverage Professionals Network brings together our WSET and CMS alumni and connects them with fellow beverage professionals, educators, producers and employers. Through tastings, producer sessions, industry events and continued education, the network provides opportunities to keep learning, exchange knowledge and build professional connections.







Nils Bihari-Andersson (DipWSET), WSET Level 3 Award in Wines Educator

Ask Nils how he became a wine educator, and his answer may surprise you.

"I never planned to become a full-time wine educator," he admits. Instead, his career developed through international industry experience, academic study, and a fascination with adult learning. Over time, he realised that what he enjoyed most wasn't simply teaching wine; it was helping people understand complex ideas in a structured, meaningful way.

That philosophy perfectly reflects WSET Level 3. Unlike introductory qualifications, Level 3 challenges students to move beyond memorising facts and begin thinking critically.

"What motivates me most is seeing students shift from asking 'What is the correct answer?' to asking 'Why does this happen?'" he says. "That's where genuine professional competence begins."

Last year, Nils led HCC-A's first five-day, in-person WSET Level 3 programme in East Africa.

For him, the milestone was memorable not because it was the first, but because of the students themselves.

"What impressed me most was their curiosity, commitment and professionalism," he recalls. "They challenged one another, asked thoughtful questions and created an environment where everyone learned together."

That collaborative spirit, he believes, is exactly what great education should encourage. Level 3 often carries a reputation for being intimidating.

Nils understands why.

Students are expected to connect viticulture, climate, geography, winemaking and tasting into one analytical framework. Yet that challenge is precisely what makes the qualification so valuable.

"Students stop memorising information and begin understanding relationships," he explains. "They're learning to analyse evidence and explain why a wine is the way it is."

Those analytical skills extend well beyond wine.

Communication.

Critical thinking.

Evidence-based decision-making.

Professional confidence.

"They're transferable skills that students carry with them throughout their careers."

As wine education continues to grow across East Africa, Nils is optimistic about the future.

"The enthusiasm is remarkable," he says. "Professional education creates shared standards and greater confidence across the industry. As more people earn internationally recognised qualifications, opportunities expand, not only for individuals but for hospitality as a whole."

His advice to anyone considering Level 3 is simple.

"Approach it with curiosity rather than fear. Don't study simply to pass the examination. Study to become a more thoughtful and capable wine professional."

Because, in the end, that's exactly what great education is meant to do.



WHERE WILL YOUR LEARNING TAKE YOU NEXT?

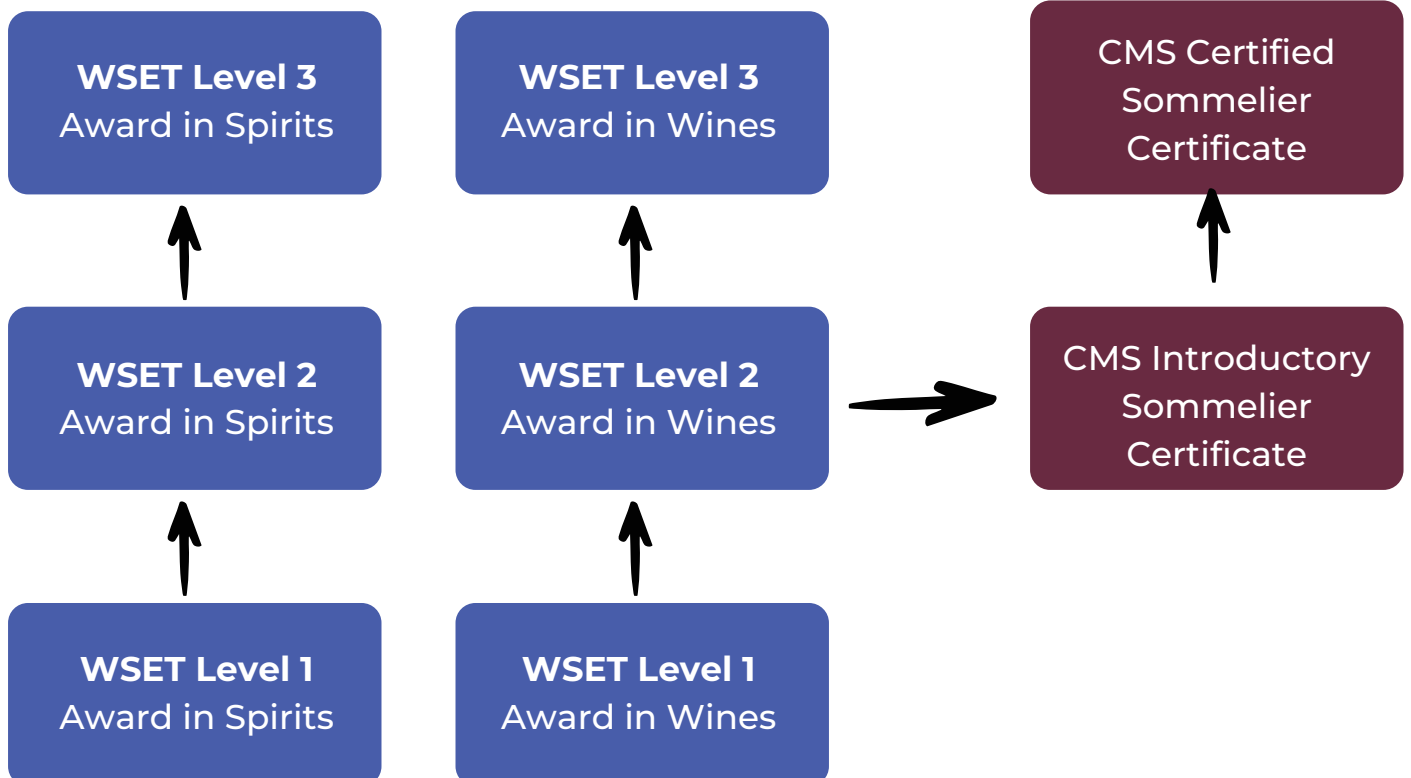
Your qualification is not the end of the learning journey. Continue developing your knowledge through WSET, CMS and specialist programmes at HCC Africa.



Wine & Spirit Education Trust
The global standard in product knowledge and tasting proficiency



Court of Master Sommeliers
The global benchmark for tasting, wine service and hospitality excellence



HOSPITALITY COMPETENCE
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The First Step on a Long Road: *Inside the Court of Master Sommeliers' Debut in Nairobi*

A Conversation with Ronan Sayburn MS, Edouard Oger MS and Bertrand Lutaud MS



When Hospitality Competence Centre Africa (HCC-A) partnered with the Court of Master Sommeliers Europe to bring its inaugural Introductory and Certified Sommelier programme to East Africa, it wasn't simply introducing a qualification. It was introducing a new chapter for hospitality professionals across the region.

Following the programme, we sat down with Ronan Sayburn MS, Chief Executive Officer of the Court of Master Sommeliers Europe, alongside fellow Master Sommeliers Edouard Oger MS and Bertrand Lutaud MS, to reflect on their own journeys into wine, the qualities that define a great sommelier, and their hopes for East Africa's growing wine community.

"Wine is so much more than what's in the glass."

When asked what first drew them into wine, each Master Sommelier shared a different story, but they all arrived at the same conclusion: curiosity is what keeps you in the industry.

For Edouard, the fascination began at home in France.

"Wine was always part of family life," he recalled. "As I learned more, I realised it wasn't just about tasting wine. Wine connects history,

geography, geology, chemistry, economics, politics—even meteorology. Every bottle tells a story, and every story makes you want to learn more."

That idea resonated throughout our conversation. Wine, they explained, is a subject that never stands still. No matter how experienced you become, there is always another region to discover, another producer to meet, or another vintage to understand.

Ronan smiled as he added,

"That's one of the beautiful frustrations of wine. You never finish learning."

There are no shortcuts

With the Master Sommelier Diploma regarded as one of the most demanding qualifications in hospitality, we asked whether there was a secret to succeeding.

Ronan was quick to dismiss the idea.

"People often look at the title," he said, "but they don't see the years behind it. Success comes from consistency. It comes from showing up every day, learning a little more than you knew yesterday."



He compared the journey to sculpting.

"You chip away every day. Slowly, over time, something remarkable begins to take shape."

Bertrand agreed, noting that setbacks are part of every successful career.

"Everybody experiences failure. The important thing is not to stop because of it. Learn from it, and keep moving."

It was advice that clearly resonated with the inaugural East African cohort, many of whom are only just beginning their own journeys.

Being a sommelier isn't just about wine

One of the most interesting moments in our discussion came when we asked what makes a truly exceptional sommelier.

None of the three began by talking about wine. Instead, Edouard spoke about people.

"A sommelier serves guests before they serve wine," he explained. "Technical knowledge is important, but if you cannot communicate, understand your guest or make people feel welcome, then you're missing the essence of hospitality."

The conversation naturally shifted towards humility.

No one, they admitted, knows everything.

"It's perfectly acceptable to say, 'I don't know, but I'll find out,'" Ronan said. "Guests respect honesty. They don't expect you to know everything. They expect you to care."

Why East Africa gives them confidence

As our conversation turned towards East Africa, the atmosphere became noticeably optimistic. Having spent several days teaching candidates from across the region, all three Master Sommeliers spoke enthusiastically about the appetite they had witnessed.

"The enthusiasm surprised me," Bertrand admitted. "People asked thoughtful questions. They wanted to understand—not just memorise."

Ronan agreed.

"That's exactly the kind of curiosity that creates great professionals."

When asked whether East Africa could one day produce its own Master Sommelier, there wasn't even a pause.

"Absolutely," came the unanimous response.

The foundation, they believe, is already being built.

More than a qualification

Before concluding our conversation, we asked each Master Sommelier what advice they would leave with anyone considering this path.

The answers were remarkably similar.

Stay curious.

Find people to learn alongside.

Taste widely.

Never stop asking questions.

And perhaps most importantly, enjoy the journey.

As Ronan reflected, "Don't chase the title. Chase becoming better every day. The title will look after itself."

For HCC-A, that sentiment perfectly captures what the inaugural Court of Master Sommeliers programme represented.

It wasn't simply about examinations or certifications. It was about creating a community of professionals committed to excellence, lifelong learning, and raising the standard of hospitality across East Africa.

The Deductive Tasting Method is taught from Level 1, and when adhered to will produce confident and accurate tasters.



COURT OF
MASTER SOMMELIERS

Chair's comments to the candidate

Before you start, the
you have 25 minutes to de
if you after 12 and

Loise Wanjiru on becoming East Africa's first Certified Sommelier

HCC AFRICA ALUMNI NETWORK



Loise Wanjiru, WSET Level 3 Graduate & East Africa's First Certified Sommelier (CMS Europe)

For Loise Wanjiru, wine wasn't part of a carefully planned career. *"It was actually a really nice accident," she says with a laugh.*

"When I first entered the industry, I didn't know much about wine. It was simply part of my job. But the more I learned, the more fascinated I became."

That curiosity would eventually take her further than she ever imagined. After completing the WSET Level 3 Award in Wines, Loise became East Africa's first Certified Sommelier through the inaugural Court of Master Sommeliers Europe programme hosted by HCC-A, a milestone not only for her career but for the region's hospitality industry. For Loise, the achievement represents far more than passing an examination.

"It validated the countless hours of studying, tasting and stepping outside my comfort zone. It reminded me that if you're willing to put in the work, even goals that seem out of reach can become reality."

She credits WSET Level 3 with fundamentally changing the way she thinks about wine.

"It wasn't just about knowing what I liked anymore. I understood why wines taste the way they do." That analytical approach made the transition into the Court of Master Sommeliers programme far more natural. Yet throughout our conversation, Loise continually returned to one subject: people. *"I love it when guests tell me they don't know much about wine," she*

says. "That's my opportunity to make wine feel approachable rather than intimidating."

For her, the role of a sommelier goes far beyond recommending bottles. Empathy. Communication. Genuine hospitality.

Those are the qualities she believes separate good sommeliers from exceptional ones.

"The best service feels effortless to the guest," she explains, "even though it's built on years of preparation behind the scenes."

Loise hopes her achievement encourages more hospitality professionals, and more employers, to invest in wine education. *"When organisations invest in people, they're not just developing careers. They're raising the standard of hospitality across the entire region."*

Looking ahead, she hopes to continue educating professionals, encouraging more adventurous wine lists, and helping guests discover wines they may never otherwise have experienced.

For Loise, learning has never been about reaching a destination. It's about continuing to grow.



“ There is a tremendous sense of community and support amongst the alumni of the Court of Master Sommeliers. ”

GIUSEPPE D'ANIELLO, ADVANCED SOMMELIER

COURT OF MASTER SOMMELIERS





Professional and friendly Wine Service is an important part of our Examinations; along with Theory and Tasting Ability.





California Beyond Cabernet: Why the Capstone California Programme Matters for East Africa

For decades, California has been one of the world's most influential wine-producing regions. While Napa Valley may be its most recognizable name, California's story stretches far beyond a single valley, encompassing diverse climates, pioneering winemaking, sustainable viticulture, and an extraordinary range of grape varieties that continue to shape the global wine conversation.

Recognizing the importance of understanding this dynamic region, we proudly introduced the Capstone California programme to East Africa, becoming one of the first education providers in the region to offer this internationally respected certification.



More than simply another wine course, Capstone California provides hospitality professionals, retailers, importers, sommeliers, and wine enthusiasts with an opportunity to explore one of the world's most exciting wine regions through a structured and immersive curriculum.

A New Perspective on California

Developed by the California Wine Institute, Capstone California was designed to provide comprehensive education on California's wines, regions, history, and culture. The programme combines technical knowledge with practical understanding, enabling students to confidently communicate California wines in both professional and consumer settings.

Participants explore topics including:

- California's history and wine heritage
- Climate and diverse wine-growing regions
- Key grape varieties and wine styles
- Viticulture and winemaking practices
- Sustainability and innovation
- Food and wine pairing
- Guided tastings of representative wines

Rather than focusing solely on famous appellations, the programme encourages students to appreciate California's remarkable diversity, from the cool coastal vineyards producing elegant Chardonnay and Pinot Noir to the warmer inland regions renowned for expressive Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, and Rhône varieties.

Raising the Standard of Wine Education

As East Africa's hospitality industry continues to evolve, demand for internationally recognised wine education has never been greater. Consumers are becoming more adventurous, premium wine lists are expanding, and hospitality professionals are expected to possess increasingly sophisticated product knowledge.

Introducing Capstone California reflects our commitment to providing education that is relevant to today's global wine industry while remaining accessible to professionals within the region.

The programme complements internationally recognised qualifications such as WSET by allowing students to deepen their understanding of one of the world's most commercially important wine regions. It bridges theoretical knowledge with practical application, giving professionals greater confidence when recommending wines, engaging guests, or building curated wine programmes.

Learning Through Experience

One of the defining strengths of the Capstone California programme is its emphasis on tasting. Students don't simply study California wines; they experience them.

Guided tastings help participants identify regional characteristics, understand stylistic differences, and connect theory with what's in the glass. This experiential approach transforms classroom learning into practical knowledge that can be applied immediately in restaurants, hotels, retail environments, and wine events.

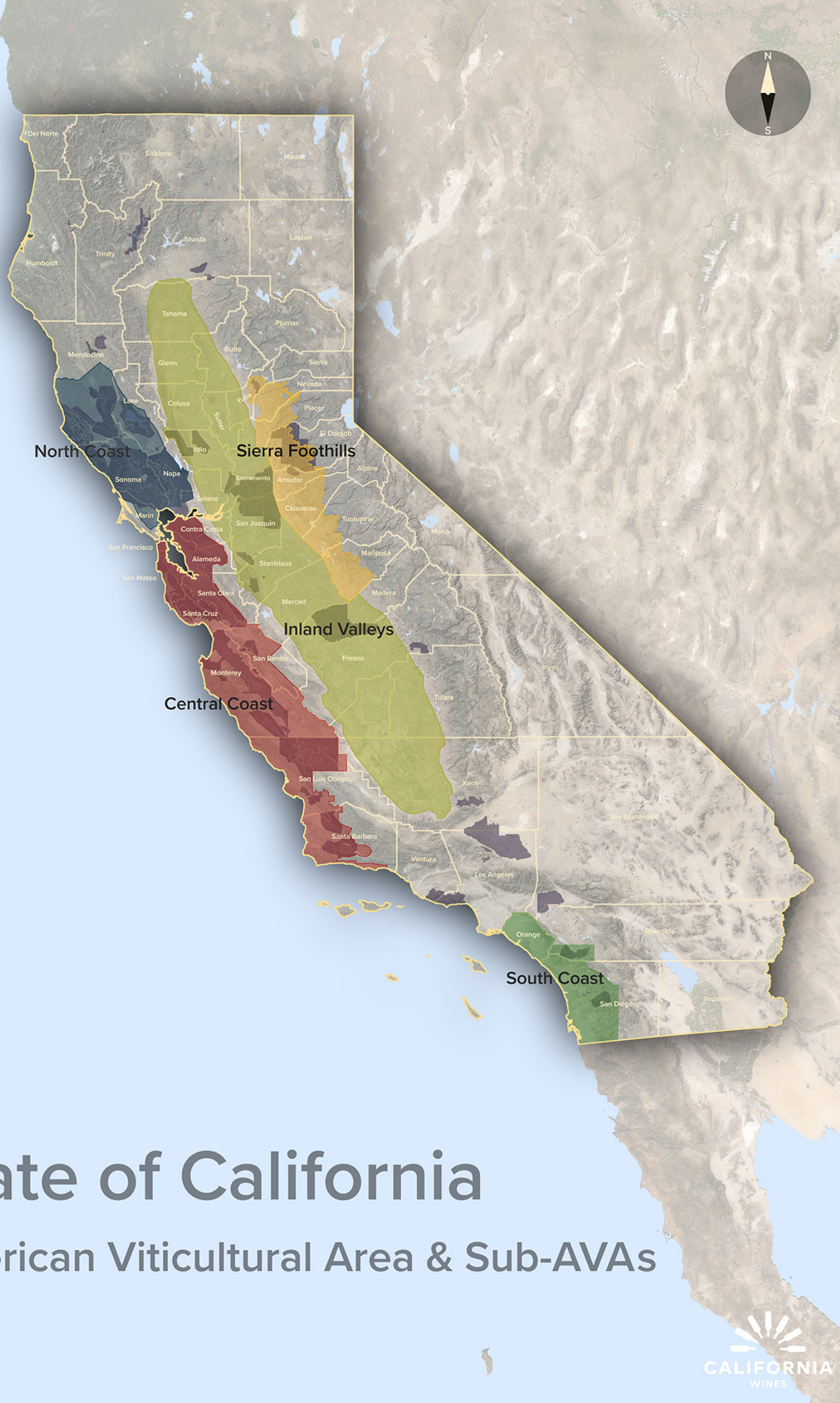
The result is a richer appreciation of how geography, climate, and winemaking decisions shape every bottle.

Building a Stronger Wine Community

Education has always been at the heart of our mission. By expanding its portfolio to include specialist regional programmes such as Capstone California, we continue to equip East African wine professionals with globally relevant knowledge while fostering a culture of curiosity and continuous learning.

The inaugural Capstone California programme marked another important milestone in our journey of bringing world-class wine education closer to the region. It also demonstrated the growing appetite among East African professionals to explore the diversity of the world's great wine regions beyond traditional European classics.

As California continues to innovate and redefine modern winemaking, programmes like Capstone California ensure that East African wine professionals remain connected to the global industry, one tasting, one lesson, and one conversation at a time.



State of California

American Viticultural Area & Sub-AVAs







Approved
Programme
Provider

THE TWO LEVELS OF CERTIFICATION



INTRODUCTORY SOMMELIER CERTIFICATE

The Introductory Sommelier Certificate is a three-day intensive programme comprised of two days of course work followed by one day of examinations.

Entry Requirements: Minimum of twelve months practical hospitality experience, a good basic theoretical knowledge of wines.



3 DAY PROGRAMME



CERTIFIED SOMMELIER CERTIFICATE

The Certified Sommelier Certificate is the primary certification for wine and beverage professionals, comprised of one full day of examinations. There is no coursework for this level.

Entry Requirement: Introductory Sommelier Certificate



1 DAY PROGRAMME

CAPSTONE CALIFORNIA

Introductory Level 1

CAPSTONE CALIFORNIA

Intermediate Level 2



HOSPITALITY COMPETENCE
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