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STAGE 1 ASSESSMENT. MY SUCCESSFUL PREPARATION EXPERIENCE

Having graduated from the Austrian Wine Academy (Weinakademie Österreich) WSET Diploma programme, having written and defended a thesis on the topic of “Brettanomyces in wine, a fault or not?” with flying colours, I acquired the title of Weinakademiker. At that time I believed I wouldn’t proceed with my wine education any further. However, a number of people, including Masters of Wine, told me that I should try to enroll in the MW programme.



Successful work as head of an enterprise for the cultivation of grapes and wine production requires obtaining and constantly using in-depth knowledge in viticulture, winemaking and in the wine business as well. The wine world is diverse and full of new information that needs to be constantly monitored.

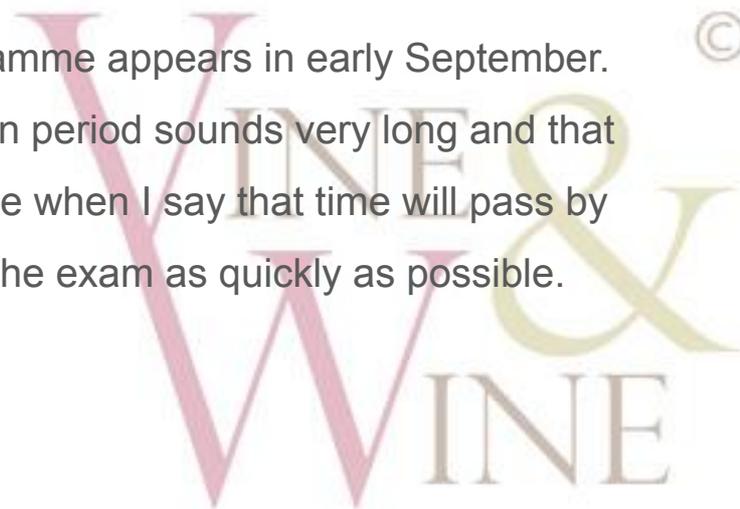
Encouraged by the fact that all of us need continuous self-development, I decided to enroll in the MW programme without giving it a second thought, first having enlisted the administration's support.

Having started the MW programme, I began searching the Internet for articles on how to prepare for my first upcoming exam - Stage 1 Assessment (S1A). But I failed to find any specific information. That is the reason I have decided to write this article and share my successful preparation and examination experience.

STAGE 1

At the end of the first year of studying in the MW programme at the Institute of Masters of Wine, all MW students are to take their first exam - S1A. This test takes place in early June, that is, in fact, 9 months after getting into the programme.

Information about admission to the programme appears in early September. It may seem that a nine-month preparation period sounds very long and that there is enough time ahead but believe me when I say that time will pass by very fast. You need to start preparing for the exam as quickly as possible.



I want to make it clear right at the outset that the MW programme is very difficult and it is impossible to get prepared for the exam over a weekend, week or month. Passing the examination requires lengthy systematic preparation. Of course, it very much depends on each individual, on their mental abilities, their working experience in the wine industry, their basic and wine education. But the amount of information and the list of recommended literature were so great that when I started the programme, I didn't know what to begin with. The first year was very difficult for me personally.

Until about January I had a complete mess in my head when trying to work out my preparation method and my wine tasting system. During the preparation process I got to know many different people: Masters of Wine and MW students Stage 2 - they willingly shared their experience, and I listened carefully, took notes and memorized everything.

If the euphoria of the news about your admission to the programme gives way to shock or depression, don't be afraid, this is perfectly natural. I have gone through it too. And I think I will have to experience this range of emotions again during the second stage of the programme (Stage 2).

Stage 1, as well as the entire programme, is based on self-preparation. Getting prepared for the exam is your responsibility. However, the Institute of Masters of Wine provides students with some support. It is as follows:

Firstly, each MW student is assigned a mentor from among the Masters of Wine. My Stage 1 mentor was Caro Maurer from Germany. Students build business relations with their mentors on their own. They can also turn to their



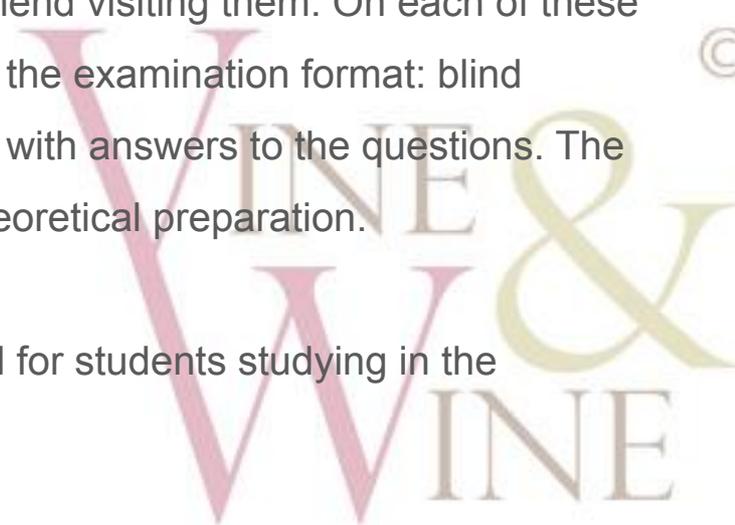
mentors for advice from time to time. It is essential for students to have a clear understanding of what the MW programme is, what awaits them and what path lies ahead. Students must take in the fact that nobody is going to force them to study, prepare for exams and to motivate and encourage them. It's all up to them!

While studying in this programme, I came across people who must have failed to fully realize where they got and what they were supposed to do. I heard some students say that they needed to be encouraged and forced to study. But this could hardly happen. So, as a result, some MW students leave the programme (which is not a cheap pleasure!) before the first exam takes place or fail the exam itself. Therefore, mentorship includes overall direction.

It is noteworthy that all mentors are very busy people and carry out this mission on a voluntary basis. It is very important to understand in detail the idea of the programme as well as the procedure for preparing and passing the first exam (S1A). And if you have questions, you should turn to your mentor for help. A mentor can give you practical advice but obtaining knowledge is your responsibility.

Secondly, during the first year of study, the Institute of Masters of Wine organizes 4 course days. I highly recommend visiting them. On each of these days in the morning you will taste wine in the examination format: blind tasting of 12 wines in 2 hours 15 minutes with answers to the questions. The rest of the day, as a rule, is devoted to theoretical preparation.

Thirdly, a residential seminar is organized for students studying in the



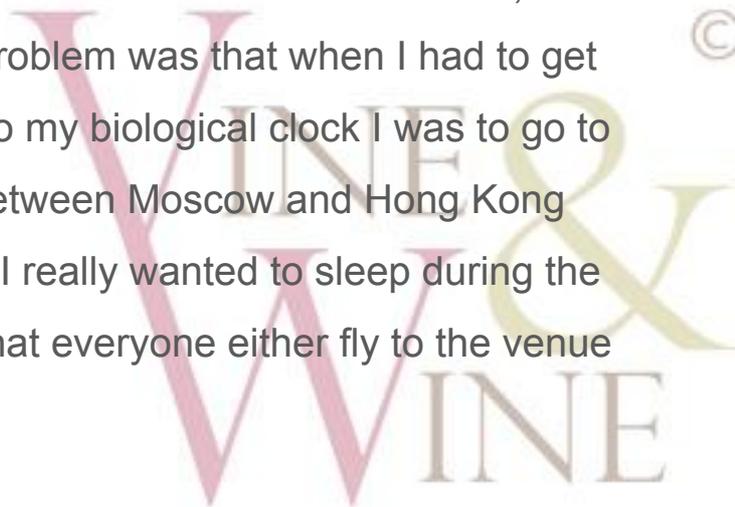
programme. It takes place in one of three centres: Rust (Austria), Woodinville (USA), Adelaide (Australia), where for about 6 days students taste wine in the morning in the Masters of Wine format, and the rest of the day is devoted to gaining theoretical knowledge.

Fourthly, at the first stage of the programme students are asked to complete 3 practical tasks - PAMS (tasting several wines with written answers to the questions asked) and 3 theoretical tasks - TAMS (writing an essay on previous years' examination questions). You will receive detailed feedback based on the results of the tasks checked by Masters of Wine. This feedback will help to understand your strengths and weaknesses.

Course days

An MW student has the right to choose places to visit on the course days from the list offered: London (UK), Washington DC (USA), Napa (USA), Hong Kong (China), Sydney (Australia).

I remember very well my first two course days. In early November 2018, I flew to Hong Kong, a very beautiful, colourful and vibrant city. The course days were perfectly organized. We had a small group of 5 people. It was very convenient since everyone had enough time to ask the Master of Wine, who taught classes, their questions. My only problem was that when I had to get up for classes in the morning, according to my biological clock I was to go to bed. Five-hour difference in time zones between Moscow and Hong Kong adversely affected my physical condition: I really wanted to sleep during the classes. Therefore, I highly recommend that everyone either fly to the venue



for the course days in advance to combat jet lag or choose the venue for the course days with a slight time zone difference.

Until November, I did nothing but reflect upon what was required for the successful preparation for S1A: I looked into the Student Guide and a number of Examiners' reports, examined the structure of the theoretical and practical parts of the exam. In other words, I collected information. My first course days made me realise that tough preparation was yet to come for me.

Truth be told, I scraped through the practical part. I could not finish tasting and answering all the questions within the available time frame. Looking at the theoretical part of the exam, I also realized how much information I had to master in detail. That was really challenging, but I never gave up. However, during the course days I gradually started putting the pieces together and shape up my own strategy for exam preparation. The Masters of Wine Jennifer Docherty, Debra Meiburg and Sarah Heller shared valuable information and their experiences. Learning to listen and hear is really important.

I actually spent the third and fourth course days at the Institute of Masters of Wine in London in late February and early April respectively. This time I did not suffer from jet-lag. Taking the course days helped me a lot in my preparation process: it was becoming increasingly clear what I should work on. I began to gather momentum.



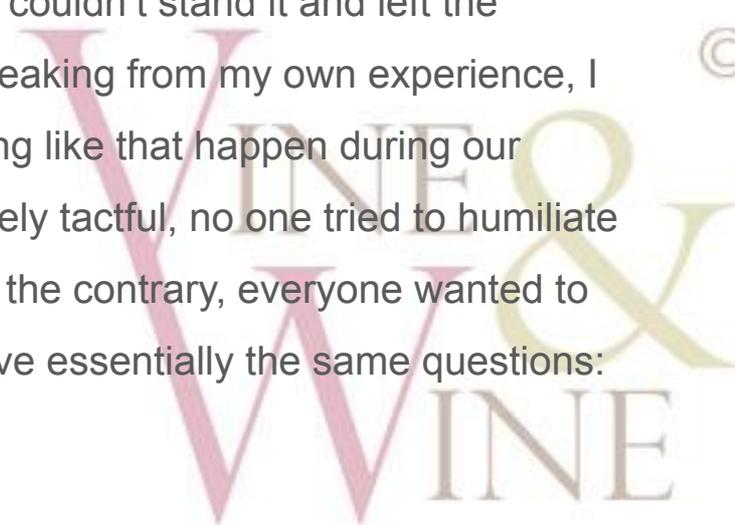
Residential seminar

During the first stage of training (Stage 1) all MW students are required to attend the residential seminar. I attended it in Rust (Austria), in my alma mater, the Austrian Wine Academy.

During that fairly intense week we tasted 12 wines and studied theory in “examination setting” every day. We also had an opportunity to test our pilot practical work and receive detailed comments from the Masters of Wine. It was an incredibly interesting and fruitful week, but at the same time it was very tiring. I remember being very worried at the beginning of our residential seminar, as by that time I had never managed to meet the deadline of 2 hours and 15 minutes while tasting 12 wines.

When making welcoming remarks, one of the Masters of Wine told us that some people in the room might think they had got there by mistake, but that was not so: everyone was there because it was the way it should be, and that couldn't be a mistake. These words came in handy as such thoughts had occurred to me.

I had heard rumours that Masters of Wine could play hardball with you in front of everyone and that some students couldn't stand it and left the classroom with tears in their eyes. But speaking from my own experience, I can assure you that we never had anything like that happen during our classes: all Masters of Wine were extremely tactful, no one tried to humiliate us or show that we were out of place. On the contrary, everyone wanted to help and did help us. All MW students have essentially the same questions:



how to get prepared and pass the exam. And everyone asked the Masters of Wine their questions, so did I. And I never heard any hints of irritation in their voices, all of them shared their experience at length.

It was really hard for me to do the practical part but the progress was becoming increasingly evident with each passing day. I could not decide how to organize my tasting notes: I tried to answer questions on the spot, used the “cross” system, made unsystematic notes, nothing suited me. As a result, the Master of Wine Rod Smith advised me to use the “table”. And it was the method that turned out to be the most suitable for me. I will write further in this article what the table looks like.

During our theoretical studies, we practised analysing an exam question, writing a plan of the answer, introduction, paragraphs, conclusion and the use of examples from the world of wine.

If at the seminar you fail to finish the practical part on time, this is not the end of the world. Do not give up. After all, no one said it would be easy.

Otherwise, there would be lot more Masters of Wine worldwide rather than 390.

At the end of the seminar I had a complete understanding of what was required to pass the exam and how to arrange my preparation process.

Bootcamp

If you can afford to visit bootcamps, do it without hesitation. They last 3 days,



from Friday to Sunday.

I visited three of such camps during Stage 1: in Athens with Yiannis Karakasis and Caro Maurer, in Rheingau with Caro Maurer and Frank Roeder, and in Paris with Jeremy Cukierman and Rod Smith. I was completely satisfied but, most importantly, I received new information and knowledge every time I went the bootcamp.

The benefit of these bootcamps is that, along with other MW students, you taste wine in the examination format and then analyse your answers with Masters of Wine. You see the answers of other students and can compare them with yours.

When getting prepared for the exam in the bootcamp, we also focused on theory. In Rheingau, apart from practicing, we were supposed to write a practice essay within a certain time and then we analysed our essays which eventually were marked.

In Paris, we had an opportunity to have one of our practical papers checked and to get detailed written comments. After getting comments and advice on my practical paper from Jeremy Cukierman, I rewrote it. This helped me a lot, as I had only 2 weeks left before the exam.

So, how did I approach my preparation for the S1A exam?



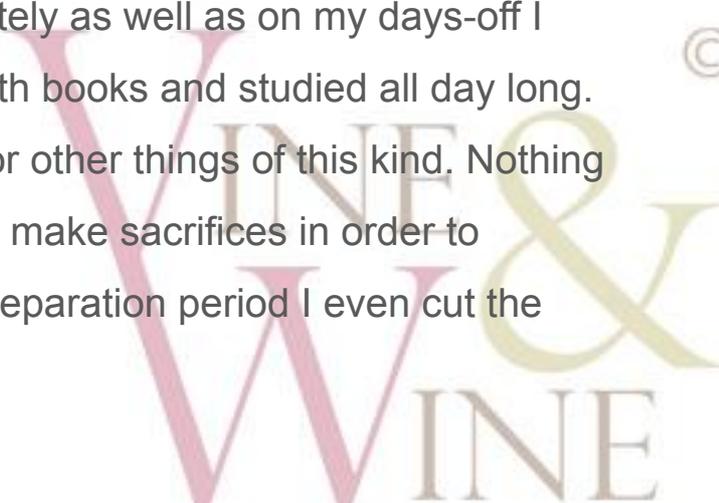
PREPARATION

Daily schedule

At the very beginning of my preparation I realized that the MW programme would require my total immersion and strict adherence to the established daily schedule. As I have mentioned above, all MW students are to take the S1A exam at the end of the first year of study which is about 9 months after enrolling in the programme. It may take you a few months to comprehend the examination requirements, develop a training plan, find specialized literature and systematize the information obtained. And you will eventually have about 6-7 months left for the preparation.

Time flies very fast, and there are many temptations around us: to spend our quality time with our family outdoors, to go to the pictures or to a bar with our friends at the weekend, to sit in front of the TV with a glass of wine, to have an early night, to take a long vacation overseas and many other things. And almost all of us have a job that requires a great deal of time.

I came to the conclusion that sticking to the established daily schedule must become my way of life in order to succeed in achieving my goal. Every evening after work, no matter how tired I was, I had to sit down and study. On the days when I could afford to work remotely as well as on my days-off I woke up early in the morning, sat down with books and studied all day long. No distractions, no meetings with friends or other things of this kind. Nothing but preparation! You will inevitably have to make sacrifices in order to succeed in getting prepared. During my preparation period I even cut the number of my vacation days from 14 to 4.



I completely gave up any type of alcohol since for me personally it was a form of relaxation which was the last thing I needed. It was extremely difficult to get into the swing of preparation and it was so easy to get distracted. I was preparing for the exam just like an athlete prepared for the Olympics: calculation and systematic studying in line with the schedule. I calculated everything so that my peak condition fell on the examination day. I went to bed at the same time every day, strictly followed the established schedule and kept discipline.

Sports

During one of our course days in Hong Kong our mentor recommended that we should take up sports as preparing for the exam required a huge amount of strength and endurance and the exam itself required us to be in perfect physical shape. My friend at the Austrian Wine Academy, the Wineakademiker Srdan Lisac Ph.D., also advised me to take up sports because during physical activity a human body and brain are saturated with oxygen which is required for intense mental activity. Sport also makes one keep discipline and increases stamina.

I started running on a treadmill but soon realized that this was not exactly my kind of sport. Then I took up swimming but an allergy to chlorine forced me to quit it. Eventually, I decided to work out in the gym. It gave me real pleasure and a huge burst of energy, that's why I still keep working out. From my point of view, sport is an integral part of any successful person's life. In terms of sports, I became more attentive to my diet, trying to get a balanced number of carbohydrates, protein and fats. I also took vitamin complexes to boost brain activity.

Practical part

First of all, I figured out what questions this part of the exam could include. Among those were: determining the grape variety the wine was made of, the origin of the wine, its quality, age and potential for further ageing, its production method, style and commercial potential.

Next, I began to thoroughly sort through grape varieties. As they say: practice makes perfect. I compiled statistics of all wines that one could come across at the main exam from 1990 to 2018 and combined them into a table, sorting them by countries, regions, geographical names, grape varieties and years when those wines appeared at examinations. It immediately became clear what grape varieties and wines were included in the exam more often.

It's definitely not worth considering such statistics to be an exhaustive list, as new wines and grape varieties may be included in the exam. However, such statistics significantly narrow the scope of preparation. I recommend you to closely study the statistics for all past exams.

Then I compiled a one-page file for each grape variety included in the exam at least once and a few additional ones at my discretion, a total of 51 white varieties and 51 black varieties. It contains the following information: the origin of each grape variety, their main viticultural, winemaking and organoleptic characteristics, their main blending partners as well as their main growing areas. Next, I tabulated all the grape varieties, highlighting the main parameters of each one (and namely, color intensity, aroma intensity, acidity, alcohol, red wine tannins, typical aromas and the main growing



areas). This systematized information helped me a lot in the process of preparation and at the exam itself.

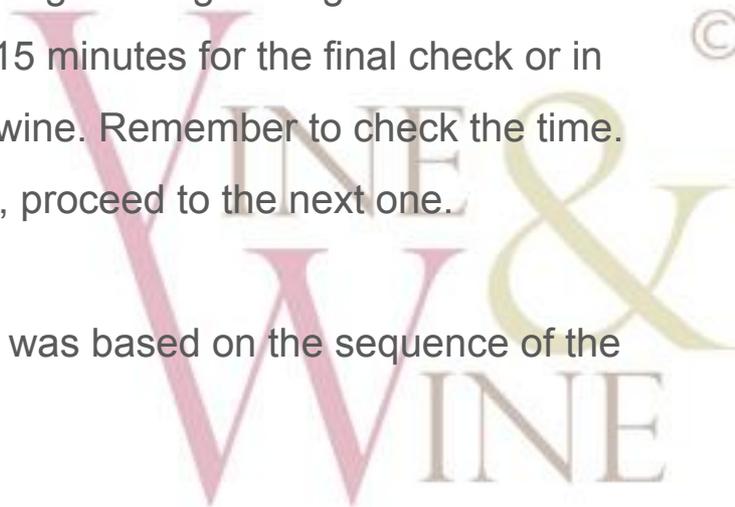
I have decided to share this information with everyone and I am developing a special section on my website www.vineandwine.vin where you will see 102 grape varieties with the information mentioned above in the near future.

Then I examined in detail the methods for producing still red, rosé and white wines as well as sparkling, fortified and sweet wines. This information helped me to answer the question on a production method.

I dealt with the questions on wine's age, its quality, style and commercial potential as well as on its potential for further ageing exclusively by tasting wines. Speaking of tasting, from January to June 2019 I tasted wines in the examination format (I blindly tasted 12 wines for 2 hours 15 minutes) 25 times, during our two course days, residential seminar, two bootcamps and there were also some personal tastings.

It was important to learn to finish tasting wines within the fixed time limit. Given that the maximum number of marks is 300, for each wine you can get a maximum of 25 marks. There are 135 minutes in total to taste all wines. I allocated 10 minutes per wine both for tasting and registering the results. This is 120 minutes, accordingly. I saved 15 minutes for the final check or in case there was a bit of a hitch with some wine. Remember to check the time. If the time limit for a question is exceeded, proceed to the next one.

I tasted wines in blocks. The tasting order was based on the sequence of the



questions. On the recommendation of the Master of Wine Rod Smith, I did not read the questions before tasting. I just tasted the wine, wrote down what it tasted like and gave a conclusion. And if after reading the questions, my conclusion seemed relevant to the question, I never changed it. If you first read the questions, you can subconsciously begin to tailor the wine to the question and look for something that wasn't there.

I documented the results of tasting in the table that had the following columns: nose of wine (intensity and aromas) and colour, taste of wine (texture, malolactic fermentation, lees ageing), residual sugar, alcohol, acidity, red wine tannins, oak (French-American; new-used; capacity), balance, length, flavour intensity, complexity, conclusion (wine, country, region, price, grape variety and quality level).

You need to use logic and deduction while tasting. It is necessary to give facts based on what there is in the glass and then make a logical conclusion resulting from these facts. Taste each sample not more than twice: the first one - at the beginning of the tasting and the second one - at the end of the tasting in order to confirm the conclusion. Otherwise, you will not meet the deadline.

I gave special attention to enhancing my vocabulary to write the answers. They should be clear, understandable and to the point. All the arguments must be based on what there is in the glass.

I did not forget about the vintages of classic wines (Bordeaux for red wines and Burgundy for red and white wines). I tabled the main characteristics of



the vintages over the past 10 years.

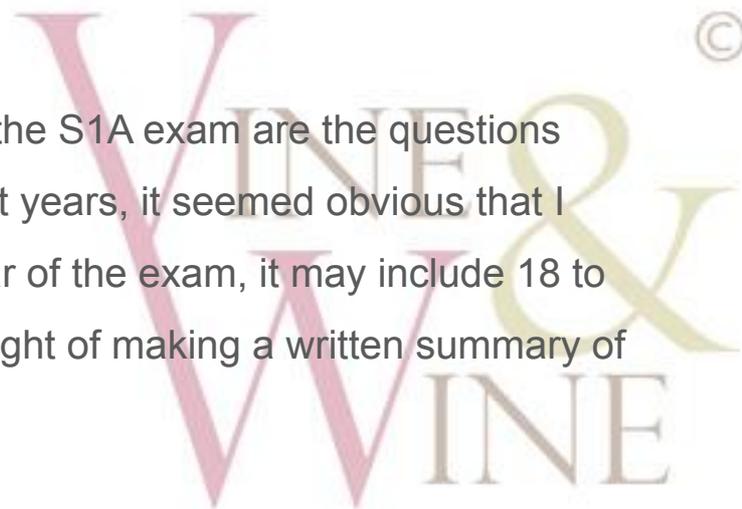
Upon completion of the preparation for the practical part of S1A, seeing my progress, I made an unambiguous conclusion: in order to pass the practical part, you need to practice, practice and practice again to taste wines in the examination format as well as to pay attention to the theoretical aspects of the practical part. It is necessary to taste classic wines, popular styles, classic grape varieties, certain vintages. You should not spend much time tasting “obscure wines”.

While tasting do not try to guess the logic of the examiner, just answer the questions on the basis of what there is in your glass. For example, there may be several wines from one country in one tasting set but you might think that this is impossible and they are trying to confuse you. Study the statistics on the exams of past years: the same tasting set can include wines from one country and even from one region. And most importantly, you should place special emphasis on developing the ability to determine the quality of wine.

Theory part

It was especially difficult to prepare for the theoretical part due to a huge amount of information.

Considering that theoretical questions of the S1A exam are the questions taken from the main MW exam of the past years, it seemed obvious that I was to study them. Depending on the year of the exam, it may include 18 to 22 questions for a given year. First, I thought of making a written summary of

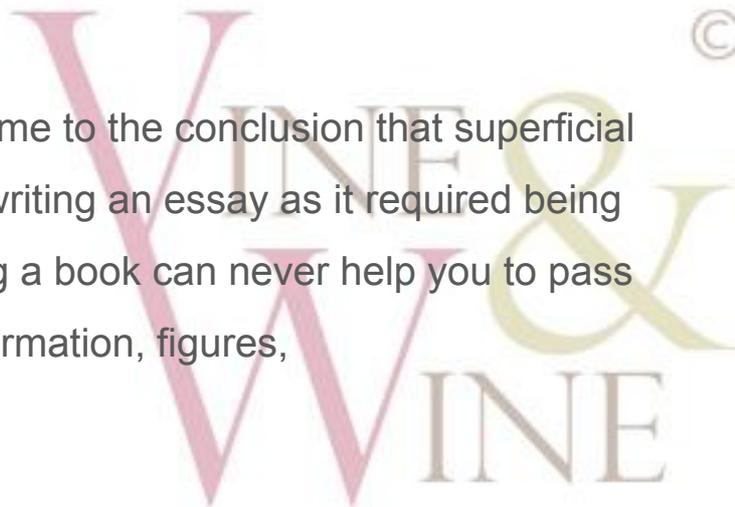


each question of the past ten years making use of the literature recommended by the Institute of Masters of Wine.

But almost immediately it became clear that it was impossible to cover all the questions of the past ten years. As a result, we formed a study group of four MW students Stage 1. By drawing lots, each of us took questions of one particular year. I got the questions of 2012 whereas the questions of 2018 were divided among all of us. So, our task was to cover the questions of five years. The advantage of this collaboration was that our good teamwork allowed for covering much more questions than an individual was able to cover. The disadvantage was that you must be 100% sure that your colleagues were going to fulfill their obligations as responsibly as you. Each of us made three summaries a week.

We managed to cover the questions of five years about a month before the exam and as a result got a stack of five folders of about 80-90 pages each. It was difficult even to read all of this, to say nothing of memorizing it. I had foreseen this situation and therefore decided to prepare for viticulture and winemaking sections by getting immersed in two main books: “Viticulture: An Introduction to Commercial Grape Growing for Wine Production” by Stephen Skelton and “Understanding Wine Technology: The Science of Wine Explained” by David Bird and also used specialized additional literature.

After reading the examination reports I came to the conclusion that superficial knowledge wasn't enough to succeed in writing an essay as it required being quite specific. Remember that just reading a book can never help you to pass this exam. You have to memorize key information, figures,



legal provisions, statistics, etc. Therefore, I filled up a card for every chapter or topic I had read. Every card included all the basic information that could subsequently underlie my answer. Then I memorized these cards using the multiple repetition method.

It is very important to follow the established structure of the answer in the theoretical part: the essay form contains an introduction where basic definitions and the gist of the essay are given. The body of the essay consists of some paragraphs (4-6) and in each of them there has to be one global example from the world of grapes and wine, confirming the argument of the paragraph. Examples have to come from different wine countries and regions. The essay concludes with the summary of the arguments described in the body. You can't include in the conclusion any new facts that were not described in the main part.

I took examples from the world of grapes and wine from numerous sources while preparing for my exam and then classified them into a table.

Recommended literature list

The list of literature recommended by the Institute of Masters of Wine is really huge and it can be very difficult to read everything, to say nothing of memorizing it. Therefore, you need to choose the main books and use them when getting prepared.

An extended list of the books I used when getting prepared can be found at:

<https://vineandwine.vin/en/articles/books/>



The main books include the following:

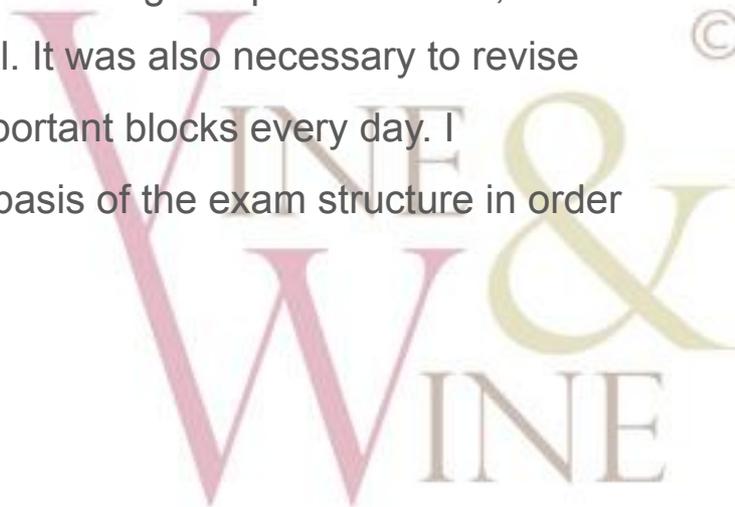
- «Viticulture: An Introduction to Commercial Grape Growing for Wine Production» by Stephen Skelton;
- «Understanding Wine Technology: The Science of Wine Explained» by David Bird;
- «The Oxford Companion to Wine» by Jancis Robinson;
- «Wine Grapes» by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding, José Vouillamoz;
- «American Wine Economics: An Exploration of the U.S. Wine Industry» by James Thornton;

Internet publications:

- Meininger's Wine Business International,
- The Drinks Business,
- Wine Business Monthly,
- Winetitles.

Three weeks before the exam

My three weeks before the exam were the most “hilarious”. There was only preparation with no work, no sport, no walks during this period. In fact, it was a revision of all previously formed material. It was also necessary to revise the material systematically, covering 4 important blocks every day. I determined the blocks on my own on the basis of the exam structure in order to cover all most vital aspects.



I did the following: I set 4 blocks for revision:

1. Wine tasting in the Master of Wine format / Revising the essay examples from the world of grapes and wine / Revising the information on cards.
2. Revising our study groups' summaries based on the questions of the past years or studying books.
3. Revising characteristics of the main grape varieties, wine regions and vintages.
4. Revising wine styles, sugar levels and production methods of various wines.

I assigned “weight” to each block in percentage terms. For example, block 1 - 20%, block 2 - 50%, block 3 - 20%, block 4 - 10%. Next, I divided my day into four parts in accordance with the percentage of blocks. I prepared from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. with breaks for meals. I wrote down the time frame for each block on a piece of paper and when the preparation time for one block ran out, I proceeded to the next one. Thus, I scrupulously paid attention to every element necessary to pass the S1A exam on a daily basis.

Moreover, preparing for the theoretical and practical parts of the exam, I memorized the correct spelling of the wine terms, including the names of the wine regions in the original language.



THE S1A EXAM

The S1A exam

The S1A exam consists of theoretical and practical parts.

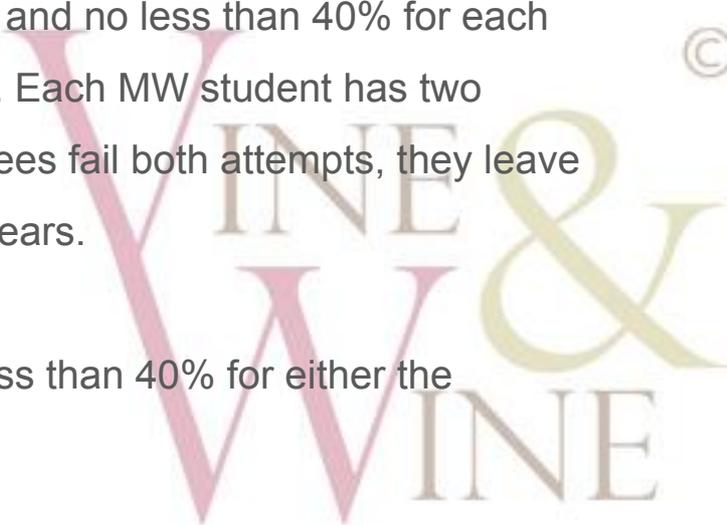
Firstly, the examinees blindly taste 12 wines and then give written answers to each question on every sample presented. The questions relate to determining the wine's place of origin, the grape variety, the method of wine production, its style and quality, its commercial potential as well as the potential for ageing in a bottle. The practical part lasts 2 hours 15 minutes.

While doing theoretical part, you need to write within two hours two essays on a given topic from the field of viticulture, vinification and pre-bottling procedures, handling of wine or from the wine business.

In order to pass the S1A exam, you need to get a total of 55% or more for the theoretical and practical parts of the exam and at least 50% for each part alone. At first glance, it may seem that it's not that much but this impression is deceptive, especially considering the required amount of information and the depth of answers.

If an examinee gets a total of 45% to 54% and no less than 40% for each part alone, he will have a retake next year. Each MW student has two attempts to pass the S1A exam. If examinees fail both attempts, they leave the program and can re-enter it only in 2 years.

If an MW student gets less than 45% or less than 40% for either the



theoretical or practical part, he leaves the program with no right to retake the exam and can also be admitted again only in 2 years.

Having started the preparation, I closely studied the Examiners' Reports as well as MW Practical Examination Guidelines and MW Theory Examination Guidelines. These two documents, along with the Examiners' Reports, are the very foundation. After studying them you will get a complete understanding of examination requirements.

So, you should study the above mentioned documents very closely and understand the required structure of answers.

Before the exam you need to get a good night sleep. During the whole preparation process and especially during the final three weeks I was completely exhausted. A day before the exam I decided not to set my alarm clock so that I could recharge my batteries. That was a good strategic decision. And the night before the exam I went to bed as soon as I felt the first signs of fatigue. In the morning I tried to put myself in the right mood and gather all my scattered wits. And as a result, I was absolutely calm right before the exam.

I recommend you to be extremely careful during the practical part to ensure that you are filling in the answers in the correct place. Estimate the "weight" of the questions and start answering the most voluminous ones. For example, if you put the task of 50 marks off for later, you are highly likely to become exhausted and pressed for time when you get down to answering it. Consequently, your answer won't be sophisticated enough.

When answering the questions, don't panic even if something goes wrong. And most importantly, give the answers to all the questions by all means!

In the theoretical part you should draw up an essay plan and stick to it, keeping track of time.

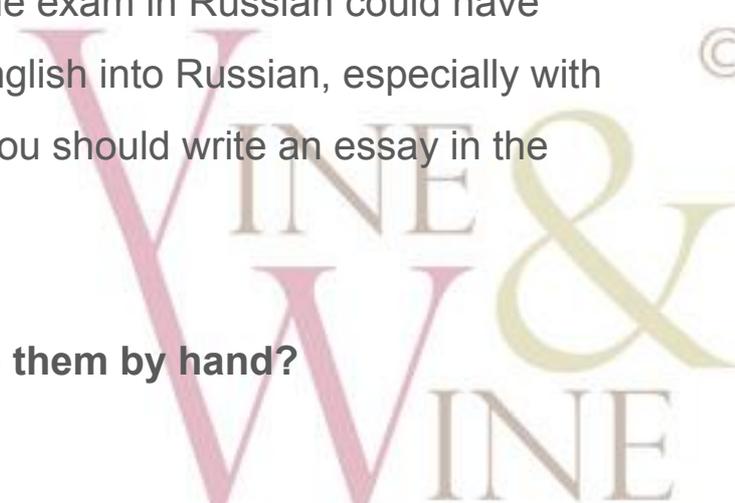
Take a silent e-watch. The thing is that in the examination room in London the timer is displayed on the screen, which is in the center of the room. There are places in the hall where this screen with the timer is not visible. Losing control over time can lead to a disaster.

Remember all the recommendations of the Masters of Wine and strictly follow them.

Examination language

About three weeks before the exam MW students Stage 1 are to decide on the language they are going to take the theoretical part of the exam in. The practical part is only available in English, but the theory (essay) can be written in any language. It is very important to consider in what language your exam preparation books are written. I wrote the exam in English as I had been preparing for it in English. Writing the exam in Russian could have caused difficulties in translating it from English into Russian, especially with respect to terms. The conclusion is that you should write an essay in the language you have been preparing for it.

Shall examinees type answers or write them by hand?



Examinees have the right to choose whether to type answers or write them by hand. I chose the first option and I wasn't wrong there.

The thing is that I tested both options. I write by hand faster than I type but my handwriting leaves much to be desired. If you have the same problem, it is worth thinking it over. I decided to type so that the examiners could make out my handwriting.

When you type your answers, you have the opportunity to make any corrections to the text without crossing out anything, with no chaos and mess. If you have forgotten to insert something into your text, you can easily do it by typing it.

Another important point: if suddenly when writing by hand, for example, the practical part, you accidentally enter the answer to one or several wines in the wrong fields, rewriting it by hand will take longer than fixing a mistake in a laptop.

Exam destination

It is very important to be full of zest and vitality at the exam. It is desirable that you avoid a jet lag and arrive at the exam destination well in advance. You can choose the destination yourself.

The result of my efforts is passing the S1A exam on the first try.

What's next?



After that Stage 2 as well as the preparation for the main MW examination begin. Considering that my strategy has helped me to pass the S1A examination, I will further stick to it.

It is important to bear in mind that even if my preparation strategy turned out efficient for me, it doesn't mean that it would be appropriate for everyone. Everybody has his own way. But if my recommendations come in handy for at least one person, it means that I have written this article not for nothing.

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