

The Need for Certification in Today's Beverage Industry

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The beverage industry is the hot new sector of hospitality. Sommeliers, Wine Directors, and Beverage Managers are seen as profit producers and savvy business people, who are indispensable to a successful beverage operation. In addition, wine and mixology professions are now where the chef's profession was in the late 80's and early 90's: on the verge of becoming celebrity positions. This has created a tidal wave of people entering the industry each year. In order to set oneself apart, certification has become almost a necessity, especially for those new to the industry. Certification is proof not only of knowledge but also of the passion, motivation, self-discipline, dedication, and the solid work ethic that employers crave. At the same time, the certification process allows the forging of relationships and networks that are integral to a successful business career. Post-nominals earned from a credible certifying organization signal that a person is not solely enamored of the glitz of tasting beverages, but is a professional who is committed to advancing themselves and the industry.

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The Benefits of Getting Certified by the SWE

The following is an interview that took place between the editor of the Society of Wine Educators Newsletter, *The Sip*, and Eric S. Crane, A.S., CWE, Director of Training and Business Development for Empire Distributors, Atlanta, Georgia.

Q: What, in your opinion, are the benefits of getting certified by the SWE?

A: A lot of people in the industry know a lot about wine, but their knowledge is often incomplete—they may know a lot about California or France, but there are gaps in their knowledge. The CSW gives a solid, well-rounded background, which we at Empire feel is extremely important in order to excel in this business. You learn about viticulture and viniculture, as well as all the major wine-producing regions and wine styles.

Q: How do you decide who gets to take the certification exams?

A: We look at a number of factors: tenure, performance, dedication, and intellectual curiosity.

Q: How many take the exam, on average?

We started sponsoring candidates in 2004. We have sent as many as 25 candidates per year, but more often, the number is between 10 - 20. That's just in the state of Georgia.

Q: What is the total number of Empire employees who have passed?

A: We have had over 40 employees in Georgia and North Carolina pass their CSW exam.

Q: *Why do you give them this opportunity?*

A: Our company feels strongly about the importance of education. We feel that this knowledge will make them better at what they do, and we want our people to be the best they can be. It's very exciting to develop people's hunger to learn more; often the CSW degree is a great stepping stone, and those who have passed it are motivated to continue to seek more wine knowledge.

Q: *What do you do to help them prepare?*

A: We conduct between 12 to 16 two-hour classroom sessions, based on the SWE Study Guide, to make sure they have a thorough understanding of the material. They attend these sessions, in addition to all their responsibilities for their full-time jobs.

Q: *What are the benefits to Empire?*

A: Since the exam is difficult, and does not have a high pass rate, passing it constitutes a real achievement. This gives confidence to those who have passed, and helps in the way they relate to their customers and consumers, as well as their friends and colleagues. We believe that the more secure you are in what you know, the better you will perform and the more fun you will have doing it.

Q: *That's a great sign you hung up on your wall, with the names of everyone who has passed SWE certifications! Why did you put that up?*

A: It's a reward for those who have passed, and it's also an incentive for others to get certified, and see their own names on the board. It generally reinforces the important role that education plays at Empire.

Q: *Why would you suggest others become certified?*

A: The Society of Wine Educators' certification offers a practical way to increase the depth and scope of people's knowledge, as well as their confidence in the field. It is efficient, in terms of time and cost, and the postnominals have real value in today's wine world. We have tried our best to promote and support the SWE here in Georgia with this program.