



STUART GEORGE

# ROLE MODELS

**J**ust look at what sommeliers are doing nowadays. Taking on a wide range of duties beyond the restaurant floor, many have become entrepreneurs. They can be found selling wine at retail, consulting on cellar acquisitions and management, writing and broadcasting, working as creative designers and brand strategists, hosting corporate hospitality events, and supporting public-relations campaigns for regional wine associations. Even some who remain within the traditional confines of the front of the house have taken on a new role: that of celebrity, stepping out of their chefs' shadows to become culinary stars in their own right.

As this diversity of options suggests, sommeliers have acquired many skills that are transferable to other wine-related—and sometimes non-

wine-related—careers. And while they may have equally varied reasons for wishing to try something new, the most common is a desire to escape the punishing hours of floor service. As Whitney Adams, sommelier at Terroni in Los Angeles, admits, "It's a tough lifestyle. That's why I went into retail with domaine LA and now work only one or two shifts a week on the floor. I wanted to have a life and be able to come home before midnight." Fred Dexheimer, MS, self-described "Master Sommelier, cocktail creator, beer junkie, and occasional booze scribe" (not to mention *Sommelier Journal* Editorial Advisory Board member), agrees: "There's a shelf life to the job. I was working a 60-hour week. It started to wear on me."

the changing  
profession

Juiceman Consulting founder Fred Dexheimer, MS, in Brooklyn, N.Y. (below); London-based restaurateur and consultant Xavier Rousset, MS (bottom left); Bobby Stuckey, MS, owner-sommelier of Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder, Colo. (bottom center).

## Whatever happened to . . . ?

In Europe, when sommeliers “retire” from the floor, they typically become bar or restaurant owners or go into the wine trade. Here at home, those career paths represent a relatively

new trend, as a growing number of former and current sommeliers are assuming the role of restaurateur. Rajat Parr of the Michael Mina restaurant group, for instance, is part owner of RN74 in San Francisco and Seattle. He has also ventured into wine-making: with Sashi Moorman, he produces the Sandhi brand in the Sta. Rita Hills American Viticultural Area of Santa Barbara County, and the pair recently announced their plan to launch another project, *Domaine de la Côte*, in the same subregion.



Then there’s Xavier Rousset, MS, who owns four restaurants in London while consulting for Keizo, an online wine retailer that launched in April 2013 (see also *Sommelier Spotlight*, Nov. 30, 2011). He is hardly the first sommelier to be involved in this aspect of the business; for example, *Sommelier Cru Private Cellar*, a direct-to-consumer online wine-sales company that relies on the recommendations of leading U.K. sommeliers, was established in 2005.

The Friulian-themed Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder, Colo., and the Scarpetta label of Friulian wines are co-owned by Bobby Stuckey, MS. But Stuckey still works the floor, as does Gerard Basset, MS, MW, OBE, 2010 Best Sommelier in the World and *Decanter’s* 2013 Man of the Year. Of his role at Hotel TerraVina, which he established in Hampshire, England, in 2007, Basset says, “I do a bit of everything here, including marketing and finance, and I serve on Friday and Saturday nights if we’re busy.”

## Market your skills

It’s increasingly rare to see sommeliers in their 50s or 60s working the floor (Basset, born in 1958, is an exception). After all, their restaurant jobs have expanded in recent years, entailing more responsibilities and a wider range of skills. Today’s sommeliers have to buy wine, keep inventories, manage costs, and maintain wine lists that





Gerard Basset, MW, MW, OBE, proprietor of Hotel TerraVina in Hampshire, England.



Hotel TerraVina dining room.

are balanced, clear, concise, and error free; they usually have staff-training duties as well. It is no longer a matter simply of taking orders, opening bottles, and serving them. London-based wine consultant Robert Giorgione, who formerly worked as a sommelier at several top restaurants, observes that “the experience and knowledge of engaging with customers are the most important aspects of the sommelier’s job. But there is also a business aspect. The sommelier has a big impact on a restaurant’s profitability and reputation, because a lot of money is tied up in wine.”

As beverage director for the BLT Group for five years, Dexheimer helped open 15 restaurants and was responsible for administration, staff hir-

London-based wine consultant Robert Giorgione.



ing, and both the wine and the cocktail lists. By the time BLT started its third property, Dexheimer had left the floor. “I was a support system,” he says. “Since then I’ve been a big-picture guy. But if that opportunity hadn’t come up, maybe I’d still be on the floor.” Eventually, he decided to strike out on his own. “There’s not really anything I can’t do within the field,” he asserts. “I use an artistic skill set, a negotiating skill set, and a food-and-wine skill set. The end reward is being able to drink great wine and eat great food and to meet people and have fun. But my contacts, my connections, and my creativity all stem from a lot of arduous grunt work at the back end. Those who embrace that will be the most successful on their own.”

“I think the wine business is a very imaginative one, and very individualistic in terms of possibilities,” observes Hendrik Thoma, MS, who worked for 12 years as head sommelier of the Louis C. Jacob Hotel in Hamburg, Germany, before moving on to host the interactive video wine show *Wein am Limit* ([weinamlimit.de](http://weinamlimit.de)); he also consults and writes about wine. “It’s very much about the person and his or her talents, ambitions, and passions. It is up to you what you envision for yourself.”

Hendrik Thoma, MS, in Hamburg, Germany.



Photos courtesy of Hotel TerraVina (top), Hendrik Thoma (middle), photo © 2010 www.robertgiorgione.com (bottom)



London sommelier-turned-salesman Luke Robertson.



## Sell, sell, sell!

Since sales skills are required for a sommelier to be effective on the floor, wine sales may seem an obvious next step. Loïc Maillet, for instance, was a sommelier in London for 10 years before becoming export director at the Bordeaux négociant La Vintage Company in 2010. But it's not always so straightforward, says Luke Robertson, once a head sommelier at several London restaurants, who quit the floor in 2012 to become a salesman at Wine Networks, a fine-wine merchant based in London and Hong Kong. "Sommeliers are not salespeople in the true sense of the word," he explains. "Sommeliers are trained

to upsell and onsell [sell second bottles], but restaurants have a captive audience that intends to spend money on the spot—it's not a hard sale. For a proper salesman, it's more of a tough sale."

Even so, Vini Italiani, an Italian wine store on London's Old Brompton Road, is staffed almost exclusively by ex-sommeliers, as is Hedonism Wines in Mayfair. Clearly these high-end retailers consider sommeliers to have the right sales skills for their businesses. Other firms, such as the London- and Shanghai-based Sarmant and Napa Valley's Soutirage, have hired sommeliers to advise high-net-worth collectors on how to spend their money.

## Start your own business

Several sommeliers besides Parr and Stuckey have gone into wine production. Richard Betts, MS, who like Stuckey lives in Boulder, Colo., established Betts & Scholl in 2004, along with Aspen art collector Dennis Scholl, to produce wines from Australia, France, and California (see also "You Want to Be in the Wine Business?" June 2008). Since selling the label to Castle Brands in 2009, he has launched My Essential Red from California and My Essential Rosé from Provence, as well as the Saint-Glinglin label of St. Émilien wines with François Thienpont. He also created Sombra Mezcal in 2007.

Likewise, Greg Harrington, MS, ex-partner and beverage director of BR Guest Restaurants, founded Gramercy Cellars in Walla Walla, Wash., with his wife Pam in 2005. They produce widely acclaimed red wines from Bordeaux and Rhône varieties.

Ken Fredrickson, MS, formerly of Charlie Trotter's in Chicago and Las Vegas and Wolfgang Puck's Spago and Chinois in Los Angeles, calls himself a "Master Sommelier, entrepreneur, and triathlete."

Today he co-owns Tenzing Wine & Spirits, an artisanal wholesaler in Chicago, and the Añoro winery (a partnership with Vine Connections' Ed Lehrman and Nick Ramkowsky) in Mendoza, Argentina.

Working sommeliers don't usually have

*André Hueston Mack, founder of Oregon winery Mouton Noir and Brooklyn ad firm Get Fraîche Cru.*



Chicago-based distributor Ken Fredrickson, MS, at the Ironman triathlon.



Photo courtesy of Get Fraîche Cru (bottom right)



a full-time sommelier, I definitely noticed a shift. When I started, a lot of my friends and family didn't know what the hell I was doing—they didn't know what a sommelier was. Nobody even knew how to say the word. But the Food Network, Cooking Channel, rock-star chefs, and food blogs have made food culture more popular." In the process, "sommeliers and wine directors are getting more attention and becoming stars in their own right. They're the new chefs."

much time to sit and write, but many are making greater use of social media to promote both their restaurants and their own careers (see also "Social Media: A Primer for Restaurants," Feb. 28, 2013). As just one example, Michael Madrigale, head sommelier and wine buyer for New York City's Bar Boulud, often tweets about bottles he's opening that night. And celebrity chefs and sommeliers can be found daily on [forkly.com](http://forkly.com) sharing food and wine finds.

Seeking an outlet for her writing and photography skills, Adams established Brunellos Have More Fun ([brunelloshavemorefun.com](http://brunelloshavemorefun.com)) in 2009. In addition, her side job in wine retail prompted her to identify a need for stylish wine accessories, "so I decided, I'm just going to start my own company!" Bottle Stock ([bottlestockshop.com](http://bottlestockshop.com)) was launched recently as "a way for me to continue to expand the possibilities of what a career in wine can be."

Former sommeliers Daniele del Gesso and Finkus Bripp founded Creative Worx Media in Munich, Germany, in 2002 to specialize in "advanced multimedia strategies for the gourmet and lifestyle sectors." Onetime Per Se sommelier André Hueston Mack, after starting the Mouton Noir wine brand in Oregon's Willamette Valley in 2007, spun off the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based design studio and ad agency Get Fraîche Cru, specializing in the food and wine industry, in 2009. A career in design is certainly a long way from serving guests in a restaurant. But the skills gleaned from working as a sommelier are still apparent: finding out what people want and like and being creative in presenting and selling the product.

## So you want to be a star

In the past, sommeliers rarely gained the profile and acclaim received by top chefs. As Adams observes, however, "in my five years as

Dexheimer counters that "if you're not working for a great chef, then it's hard to be a great sommelier. And if you're not working for a celebrity chef, you can't be a celebrity sommelier. I don't think there's such a thing as a celebrity sommelier, because ultimately sommeliers are at the mercy of chefs." But the recent \$3-million launch of The Boarding House in Chicago suggests a change in how sommeliers are perceived. Backed by commodities traders Matt Fisher and John Ward, The Boarding House is fronted by Alpana Singh, MS, long-known for her appearances on WTTW's restaurant-review show *Check, Please!* and on *Chicago Tonight* (see also *Sommelier Spotlight*, May 31, 2013). After Singh built a 500-label wine list, chef Christian Gosselin was asked to create dishes to match the wines.

Of course, while food is consumed by everybody, wine is a matter of discretionary spending, and even people with a strong interest in food don't always have a parallel interest in wine. Today's TV chefs have published books, led cooking courses, and generally turned themselves into brands, but no sommelier has yet become a star on the level of, say, Anthony Bourdain or Gordon Ramsay.

For a more realistic role model, the modern sommelier might look to Adams, who has "kind of done everything you can do: I have a podcast, I have a blog, I write and photograph, I work as a sommelier, I work in a wine shop, and now I'm launching a wine-accessories company. I like to think that sommeliers can do anything!"

"Sommelier is a powerful word. What does it really mean?" asks Gior-gione. "The role has changed." And it will surely continue to change. 🍷

*Stuart George graduated from Warwick University with an honors degree in English and European literature, then worked in wine retail for five years, completing all the Wine & Spirit Education Trust exams. He spent six months working in a winery in Friuli and another six months backpacking through the wine regions of Europe. In 2003, he was named the U.K. Young Wine Writer of the Year. He has judged at wine competitions in Austria, Brazil, Chile, China, France, Italy, and Spain and worked harvests in France, Italy, and Australia.*

*Los Angeles-based sommelier, blogger, and online retailer Whitney Adams (top left); Alpana Singh, MS, owner of The Boarding House in Chicago (below).*



Photo courtesy of Whitney Adams (top); photo by Shahar Azran (bottom)