

## SOMMELIER SPEAK

# “I have opened the door: I will hold it for others to enter”

Master Sommelier, Kamal Malik is the first Indian to pass the top qualification of the Court of Master Sommeliers. His story, as he tells it to **Ruma Singh** is both inspiring and dramatic

**M**aster Sommelier. Two words that carry considerable weight in the wine world. So much so, that there are a mere 281 in the world today who are entitled to append this post-nominal after their name. The highest qualification of the Court of Master Sommeliers' 4-tier qualification has seen more heartbreak stories than success.

Kamal Malik, with a long and successful career in hospitality, won his MS pin the hard way in August 2024. His story is fascinating – the ultimate Indian success story. Coming from a family of agriculturalists based in a village near Delhi to becoming a top Sommelier and expert in wine, spirits and sake is no mean achievement.

Based in the Maldives, Kamal works for Asia's largest wine distribution company, Maritime and Mercantile International, a subsidiary of Emirates. He spoke at length about his background, his introduction to wine, and the obstacles and difficulties he encountered on his journey to becoming a Master Sommelier. A man of composure and quiet intelligence,

his fortitude shone through along with his quiet humour.

### Excerpts from the interview:

**It is known that to achieve the level of Master Sommelier is a long, arduous journey. Can you trace this journey in brief? What was your first reaction when you heard you had become India's first MS and one of only 281 in the world?**

After I got my Advanced Sommelier pin, I was offered a seat for the Master Sommelier exam in 2018 – someone dropped out at the last minute. I took it, as seats are hard to come by. This helped me understand the format and prepare for the next time. 2019 came and was a heartbreak year: I was unable to pass any part. Then 2020 and 2021 were Covid years, when I was unable to travel to the UK for the exam. I considered giving it all up, but my wife and friends pushed me to continue.

In 2022, I went to Dubai, practised extensive tasting for a couple of weeks before the exam and managed to pass tasting and

service that year. Tasting is a massive challenge at the Masters level. It is not just timebound and oral, you need to score over 75% to pass. It means getting at least five wines out of the six blind-tasted wines correct. This is extremely tough and requires high levels of knowledge and precision. Success in theory eluded me twice before I finally managed to cross the line this year. If not, it would have been a complete reset as, per CMS rules I would need to start from zero again for the next attempt.

My reaction? The judges were good at keeping up the suspense (laughs). They called me and told me with straight faces: “You need to study even harder now... (lengthy pause) since you have passed and need to keep up your knowledge levels!”

It was an immense relief and a sense of pride that India would be listed in the few countries that are represented in the list of Master Sommeliers. We are still a very small group and the Indian hospitality sector is still learning how useful a sommelier's expertise can be. Hopefully, by reaching here I can help shine some light on this. Indian hospitality is world-renowned, we need to show the world that our skill sets match those at the very top.

The journey is like a marathon. It is not easy to find time to study and practise while working a full-time job. Discipline, passion and patience are needed in large quantities. Exams take place in Europe at the senior levels. This requires serious monetary investment and is a huge commitment to make. I'd liken it to sculpting – you need to chip away at the stone, piece by piece before it finally becomes a sculpture. It is not the result, but the journey that becomes the achievement.

**What were the most significant milestones in your journey to attaining your MS pin – your memorable moments, positive or otherwise and the people and events that impacted you most?**

At the start of my career, the Court of



Master Sommelier Kamal Malik works for Asia's largest wine distribution company, Maritime and Mercantile International based in the Maldives

Master Sommeliers (CMS) was not active outside of the USA and Europe. I became beverage manager and head sommelier long before I had any formal wine education. I learned on the job by diving into any books that I could lay my hands on. Sales and Service for Wine Professionals by Brian Julyan MS, Sotheby's wine encyclopaedia, The World Atlas of Wine and the Oxford Companion to Wine were primary resources, all amazing resources even now. Most significant was the

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Certified Sommelier exam I passed in 2011, since that was the first badge of recognition I got. I was Head Sommelier of Waldorf Astoria, Maldives at that time.

**What were the key learnings you took away from your early career with some of the top hospitality brands in the world?**

Experience counts. A sommelier is not only a person who knows wines, he must be the pinnacle of commercial acumen in hospitality and beverage sales, service, and product knowledge. To achieve that, you need to find jobs that push you to strive to be the best. I was lucky to be able to work with such hotels and bosses. I learnt sales skills, inventory management, sourcing, crafting menus and training a motivated team – all on the job.

For example, at the Waldorf Astoria and Conrad Maldives, the wine cellar dinners would have sommeliers seated at the head of the table, hosting the dinner. You could not get away with half-baked knowledge or conversational skills; you needed first-hand expertise on wine and food pairing. I hosted hundreds of those dinners over five years, twice a week on average.

**You now work with Maritime and Mercantile International, one of Asia's largest wine distribution companies. How does it differ from a career in hotels? Can there be career options beyond hospitality and wine marketing for sommeliers?**

My work today is slightly different but similar to my earlier work. I used to sell wines and spirits from table to table, I now sell from



Kamal Malik – pictured in a wine cellar – says master sommeliers are first and foremost hospitality professionals

hotel to hotel. The scope widens and you become a shared resource for many in the industry. The commercial learnings are more significant and you experience the challenges of sourcing and logistics. The impact of Customs legislation on pricing becomes clearer.

For career choices, there is also wine education and journalism, but all these still support the main goal of driving quality consumption in bars and hospitality outlets.

Master Sommeliers are first and foremost hospitality professionals, before they are anything else.

**The leap from Advanced to Master Sommelier is a big one. Could you share some pointers on how to address the knowledge gap before attempting the MS exam, as well as practical pointers on how to go about it, especially for people who have jobs?**

The Master Sommelier exam is known for its depth and breadth of knowledge. You need to be able to pin a wine to its location on a map, both in tasting and theory, and demonstrate the expertise required in sales and service. During mentoring sessions, I was told that I needed to memorise the geography and climate of a region, learn its cultivars, wine styles and appellation rules to understand what causes those wine styles to be consistent, and know the producers who make the best wines – only then are you ready. The main challenge is to be able to do all this for wines across the globe! If you plan to be a Master Sommelier, no question is 'out of the syllabus' or less important than another.

The service exam is a lot more challenging than the Advanced Sommelier's, with sections on finance and business acumen. The blind tasting focuses on classics from a global perspective and requires high precision and accuracy. There might be many ways to tackle this. I can only affirm what personally worked for me.

The exams require maintaining focus and precision over a stretch of time, which is what you train for. For example, you need to be able to answer approximately 100 different theory questions within an hour. If you do not practise rigorously, the mind tires and wanders midway through the exam. For the tasting, a set of six wines in 25 minutes is the right way to practise, not one wine in four minutes or three wines in 12 minutes.

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**In India, people often need to decide between WSET and CMS qualifications. Since you have done both, and are also familiar with the Indian job market, would you share your views on the pluses and minuses of both?**

It is lucky that we can now choose between the two, and that a path is available to follow in India. WSET is doing a commendable job in crafting the material for learning and creating a set of standards in wine and spirits education. It tests in-depth knowledge and information and is relevant to consumers, trade professionals and for beverage and related industries.

The CMS is geared specifically for on-trade and hospitality and tests you on skills acquired along with knowledge. Only Master Sommeliers run the course at all levels, and they find young professionals the right mentors at top of their game to guide them through the process.

**Name an icon in the wine world you admire.**

There are many. Of course, Jancis Robinson and Hugh Johnson for those classic and educational books, Miguel A. Torres on his pioneering efforts on tackling global warming and its impact on wine – the urgent need of the hour. Nicolas Joly on making biodynamics a hip topic; the marketing acumen of Robert Mondavi in carving a classic new world region... the list is endless.

**What next? Your own plans for the future?**

I am letting it all sink in. Let us see what happens next.

**'With great success comes great responsibility'. What is yours now?**

I believe mine is to ensure that this does not remain an isolated effort. I have opened the door; I will have to hold it for many to enter. It is a personal journey but I am ready to mentor along the way. ❖