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As Craft Brew Sales Grow Frothy, Pourers With Pedigrees Bubble Up

Beer Professionals Suggest Food Pairings, Explain Styles; 'Nice Toffee Backbone'

By CHARLES PASSY



Becoming a beer pourer with a pedigree is catching on. WSJ's Charles Passy explains how beer experts are going through the paces to become a type of sommelier for beer pouring.

LAS VEGAS—As an experienced bartender, Russell Gardner knows all too well what many beer drinkers want—a frosty mug and a ready pour of a mass-market brew. And he concedes that it doesn't exactly take an advanced degree to provide such no-frills service.

Still, Mr. Gardner, a manager at a recently opened gastro pub here, has that very certification. Meaning he's proud to call himself a Cicerone. A what?

"It's like a sommelier," says Mr. Gardner, drawing a comparison to the wine world.

The title is an Italian-derived word that may not be familiar—it is pronounced "sis-uh-rohn" and defined by Merriam-Webster in more general terms as one "who conducts sightseers." But the concept of a beer pourer with a pedigree is catching on, particularly in brew-centric establishments.

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At the Public House, a restaurant in the Venetian hotel and casino, the 30-



Emma Passy

Russell Gardner, 30 years old, is the head cicerone at the Public House at Las Vegas's Venetian hotel.



year-old, handlebar-mustached Mr. Gardner is responsible for guiding patrons through a list of more than 200 beers, helping them pick, say, the ideal West Coast-

style India pale ale (he is partial to Firestone Union Jack, which "has that nice toffee backbone to it") and then pair it with the right menu option (he recommends a Roquefort

since the pale ale's "hop bite" will cut through the pungent, salty cheese).

That is on top of his other duties, from checking on the cleanliness of the draft lines to making sure the glassware is handled correctly. A beer glass should be rinsed a final time before it is used, says Mr. Gardner, lest any detergent residue play havoc with the brew. "With the littlest bit of soap, the beer is not going to have a true head," he says.

As beer is increasingly embraced by the gourmet set—sales of craft brews surged 14% in the first six months of 2012 and the number of American breweries hit a 125-year high of 2,126, according to the Brewers Association—there is a demand for those with a knowledge and passion that goes beyond the mass market.

The Brewers Association has its own "Beer 101" online course. The Master Brewers Association of the Americas, another trade group, has a "Beer Steward" certification. And even some universities have joined the beer bandwagon: Central Washington University offers a Craft Beer Trade Certificate Program, incorporating lab work, lectures and field trips.

The Cicerone Certification Program was started about five years ago by Ray Daniels, a Chicago-based beer writer who has authored books on the subject. So far, it has certified more than 18,000 beer professionals, including 17,638 Beer Servers (the entry-level ranking), 611 Cicerones (the midlevel) and four Master Cicerones.



RUSSELL GARDNER

To earn certification, Beer Servers need to study a basic eight-page syllabus—topics include national beer styles (think Belgian lambics, English ales and German pilsners) and key beer ingredients (think malted barley, hops, yeast and water)—and then pay \$69 to take an online exam with 60 multiple-choice questions.

Master Cicerones, on the other hand, must "possess encyclopedic knowledge of beer" and have "highly refined tasting ability," according to the Cicerone program website—and demonstrate as much during a two-day in-person exam with written, oral and taste-test components. The cost is \$595—or about twice what some states charge would-be attorneys to take the bar exam.

Mr. Daniels illustrates what it takes to rise to the top by noting that at the midlevel exam, candidates are often stumped when it comes to identifying a German-style pilsner versus a fuller-bodied Bohemian one during the taste test. "We expect a Master Cicerone to do that in his sleep," he says.

Yet it can be a hard title to explain. Andrew Van Til, a 35-year-old beer authority, was the first to earn the Master Cicerone designation, passing the exam in 2009. While Mr. Van Til, a manager for Imperial Beverage, a Michigan-based beer distributor, says the name "sounds sort of elegant," he also says it gives nonbeer experts reason to pause. "They're like, 'Great. What's that?' " he says of the reaction to his title.

At the Publican, a restaurant in Chicago where the beer list covers more than 50 selections, most of the staff has Cicerone certification at some level. Servers love to suggest novel beer-and-food pairings, says operations director Kimberly Phillips, pointing to the combo of a sour-flavored ale and a maple-braised pork belly dish that "just blew people away."

Pies & Pints, a pizzeria chain with locations in West Virginia and Ohio, has more than 15 Cicerone-certified staffers. Chris Warner, general manager of the Charleston, W.V., location, says the more knowledgeable his servers are about the craft brews on the menu, the more beer they sell.

On a recent weeknight at the Public House, Michael Sanft, a Las Vegas attorney, enjoyed a tangerine-flavored wheat ale—the beer suggested by his server. "There's a lot of validity" to the Cicerone approach, he said.

At Samuel Adams, the country's largest craft brewer, even the sales staff is required to have the base, or Beer Server, level of certification. "It's like an MBA of beer," says Samuel Adams founder Jim Koch of the Cicerone program.

Not everyone has signed on. Some restaurant and bar professionals deride the idea that such a certification is necessary. "I do think it is more of a title for the sake of a title," says Chris Donahue, beverage director at Casa Nonna, a New York restaurant.

He believes that beer, unlike wine, is affordable enough that a diner can try a new brew without fear of making a costly mistake. "Do you really need someone to sit at your table to describe every hop and every style of fermentation to get you to purchase something that's a little out of the ordinary?" he asks.

At his job in Las Vegas, Mr. Gardner, who has the midlevel certification, can spend considerable time among customers talking up such styles as imperial stouts or cask-aged, un-carbonated beers. Still, the restaurant isn't just for beer buffs. It keeps a sommelier on staff as well.

Bernard Erpicum, the wine expert, is responsible for a 14-page wine list, featuring bottles with price tags that can go as high as the four figures. But he says the status of his job pales in comparison to that of the restaurant's Cicerone-certified employees. "You don't have the same level of recognition," he says. "Here, it's 'Who are you?' "

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