

Wine master

When Rockpool Bar & Grill Sydney's head sommelier Michael Engelmann received the title of Master Sommelier from the Court of Master Sommeliers in August, he became the first Master Sommelier in Australia. Here, he speaks with Greg Bondar.



Q: How did you first get into wine?

A: Growing up in France exposed me to wine at an early age. My dad always bought and aged small amounts of wine when he could. What he loved above all else was to introduce people to whatever he might have discovered, be it from a small appellation or bargain find.

I attended culinary and hospitality school from age 15 and I quickly began to gravitate towards the wine classes. When I left school I worked as a waiter for a few years in Michelin-starred restaurants but I always helped the wine teams and would regularly go wine tasting with the sommeliers.

I moved into a role as a sommelier while working in England. The head sommelier at the restaurant I was working in noticed that I had a budding interest and when a vacancy in his team came up, asked me whether I was interested

in joining it. I remember saying yes right away; no hesitation.

Q: Is it ever challenging to meet customers' needs at Rockpool Bar & Grill?

A: It is challenging anywhere; from Rockpool Bar & Grill, which has an amazing and extensive wine list, down to a small wine bar or restaurant. I love challenges; I think that they keep it fresh. My end goal is to have happy customers who return again and again because of their great experience.

Q: You're the only Master Sommelier in Australia. Does this place any additional pressure on you?

A: As of the last few weeks, I am not the only one anymore! My good friend Franck Moreau just passed the exam in London, so now there's two of us. It's great for our industry; it shows how seriously wine is taken and how quickly things are changing

and evolving in Australia.

The Master Sommelier designation is the highest worldwide certification for a sommelier. The road to passing the final examination is extremely hard and quite intense. I feel that I am a much better sommelier than I was three years ago when I first began my work towards becoming a Master Sommelier. I learned a great deal and have met many amazing people throughout these few years of intense studying.

This achievement is the start of a new chapter in my professional career. There still is a lot to be learned.

Q: Have you found any wine from your recent travels that you want to add to the cellar at work or to your own collection?

A: I love travelling and visiting different wine regions; this is where the magic happens. It is very important for me to be able

to actually go to the wine regions themselves – to see the vineyards, the wineries, the cellars, and most importantly, meet the winemakers.

I often hear colleagues say that a winery is a winery, that they've been to dozens of them, and after a while they're all the same. I don't believe that. I believe that to really understand a wine it is important to see where it came from; how it has been handled; who created it.

I'm always excited by the idea of visiting a winery and of course, meeting the wine maker and being able to have a dialogue about the wine, their vision and how they envisioned the end result, is invaluable.

My studies have taken a great deal of my free time up lately, so I haven't been able to visit as many regions as I would have liked to but that is about to change. My most recent trip was to Margaret River. I tasted a few things there that I would like to add to the Rockpool Bar & Grill wine list. As for a personal collection, I have lived in four countries within the past eight years, so I don't have the opportunity to keep collecting unfortunately.

Q: Do you have a favourite wine and wine region?

A: No, and I hope that I will never have a single favourite; it would be the saddest day of my life. I have many favourites. To me that's the beauty about food and wine – there's so much to taste and try, and a lifetime is not enough to try it all. I am a big fan of Riesling (from Alsace in Germany as well as Australia) and Chenin Blanc from the Loire Valley. Both styles are incredibly versatile, whether the latest release to decades' old, from bone dry to tremendously sweet. Both offer terrific values, are wonderful with food and don't need oak to look pretty. After that I'm a big fan of Northern Rhone Syrah; it was the first grape I fell in love with. And I couldn't live without champagne, wines from Burgundy or many other regions. ☑