

SOMMELIERS AND ROCK STARS

Sweden's sommeliers are recognised as some of the best in the world. They're also highly influential. L.M. Archer asks them what makes them tick.

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Players in Sweden's acclaimed food and wine scene turn to its sommeliers to assure success. Despite a highly regulated national alcohol retail monopoly, a social system laden with high taxes and labour costs and scant domestic wine production, Swedish sommeliers thrive both at home and abroad. In 2016, Arvid Rosengren won Association de la Sommellerie Best Sommelier of the World in Argentina, and in 2017, Rubén Sanz Ramiro won the Decanter World Wine Award, Fredrik Lindfors won first place in the Nordic Sommelier Championship, and Tina Johansson garnered the Lily Bollinger Award for Best Female Sommelier in Sweden.

Today, a successful sommelier represents not only the difference between losing money and making a profit, but capturing a popular cultural zeitgeist, the kind that attracts attention, burnishes brands and bestows Michelin stars. Producers, importers, restaurants and wine bars all want the attention of these industry influencers.

Systembolaget

In order to understand what motivates the decisions of Swedish sommeliers, it helps to unravel the context in which they operate. Sweden's government oversees the retail alcohol monopoly known as Systembolaget, or "the System Company". Founded in 1955 to address the country's chronic issues with excessive alcohol consumption, its many mandates include regulating alcoholic beverage points of sale, limiting store hours, pricing transparency, minimal mark-up, alcohol abuse education and outlawing alcohol sales to anyone under 20 years of age.

Systembolaget operates 440 stores, with an additional 500 representatives offering a broad range of alcoholic products from nearly 3,000 producers. According to the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN), the monopoly enjoyed 63 percent market share in 2016.

"People who work for Systembolaget are

highly educated, very good at their work and very knowledgeable. People trust them," says Swedish author, journalist and sommelier Marie Oskarsson. "Systembolaget also helped in pushing Sweden away from a vodka drinking country, and towards more interesting, sophisticated wine. Swedes are early adapters and open to new things. They travel a lot and see a lot of food and drink trends abroad that they want to bring home. Systembolaget reflects this."

Yet despite its popularity, some argue that the system offers quantity and value at the expense of quality. "Systembolaget is an entity that does not promote gastronomy or wine culture," says Sanz Ramiro, head sommelier at PM & Vänner in Växjö, Sweden. "Its function is purely commercial and disconnects itself from the passion behind our trade. Yes, we find ourselves promoting wine very differently from Systembolaget, from the angle of passion, love and intellectual engagement, trying to show our audience that wine is more than a mass market commercial beverage."

"There's a big difference between what Systembolaget sells and what we sell," says Jonas Sandberg, who operates Stockholm's Foli wine bar with fellow somm Béatrice Becher. "Its role is to provide, not educate. Our role, apart from running a business, is to educate, to open eyes. People walk into our wine bar to find the best wines in every category and every price range."

Importers

Due to EU regulations, restaurants and wine bars source their wine, beer and spirits from importers, not Systembolaget. Producers interested in cracking the Swedish market rely upon these 200-plus importers.

"The importers have all the contacts and can arrange winemaker dinners, tastings and happenings together with a certain restaurant and invite sommeliers," says Helena Wolff of Gothia Towers in Gothenberg. "The best way to make contact for the producer is to travel to your importer, visit restaurants and bars, and participate in trade fairs or tastings."

Sandberg agrees: "Most of the promotion and tastings of wine for the sommelier community in Sweden is done – and done very well – by the importers, so I think the first step is always to make sure that the producer is represented by a solid importer that has a strong network for trade."

Moreover, some restaurants require a listing fee. "Listing fees are rare but do happen for the major restaurant groups," says Sandberg. "For most restaurants and wine bars, the best way is to approach the sommelier/wine director, present the wine through tastings and, if possible, do a pop-up or some kind of theme evening or similar. And to be brutally honest, somms tend to look at other somms... So if you get your wine into the right place and get the buzz going, you're done."

Sommeliers appreciate that rare, unique and cutting-edge wines prove compelling antidotes to "Systembolaget palate" – the inexpensive, sweeter, high-alcohol wines prevalent in retail outlets. "It has been a big change; [it's] only in the past couple of years, especially in Stockholm, that the restaurant scene is so different from the Systembolaget," says Robert Andersson of Stockholm's Pompette Imports. "We have great selection for the restaurants and because of the 'boring' wines that you find at the monopoly, more guests will dine out to find these unique producers, style of wines and so on. I think a lot more guests are going to restaurants because of that."



"We all need to pay more attention what we eat and drink and I like to think of myself helping to create awareness."

Rubén Sanz Ramiro,
sommelier and
winner of the
Decanter World
Wine Award

Most high-profile venues employ a stable of steady importers, eager to supply their empire of eateries. Gothia Towers beverage director Helena Wolff oversees six restaurants, including Michelin-starred Upper House. “We work with 20 different importers,” she says. “I bring the importers to the hotel for tastings to see what’s available for the whole house, then use the portfolio throughout the whole house. One main importer delivers (cheaper) bulk house wine for that – they are also our beer importer.” She adds they also work with four main importers. “The rest are pretty small – we use them when we need ‘storytelling wine’, for example, like a Frappato from Sicily, and I’ll buy 12 or 24 bottles.”

Others, like Gothenburg’s Michelin-starred Koka assume the role of importer. Wine director Cathrine Suzeau says: “Björn Persson (owner of Koka, Björn’s Bar, Familjen and Spisa Matbar) always wanted to import but the rules in Sweden are quite strict regarding location, taxes, finances. We wanted good wines no one could get anywhere else to sell at a good price. We contracted with someone who could store and deliver the wines.” She says they went to Millésime Sud France wine fair and “took the head somms from the other restaurants with us. We knew we wanted organic, biodynamic wines because Koka is certified sustainable. So that’s how it started. Even before we started Björn’s Bar, normally people don’t expect to find the wines they find in Systembolaget. In Koka, we sell wine-pairing menus offering three-, five- and seven-course wine pairings options; 90 percent take wine pairings. They want us to recommend.”

Cost of doing business

However, the cost of running a restaurant or a wine bar runs high in Sweden. In addition to a 25 percent value added tax (VAT) on most goods and services, the government levies further excise duties for beer, wine and spirits, based upon alcohol content.

“Labour is very expensive, so restaurants can rarely afford just a sommelier,” says Sandberg, “although I have been fortunate to work at two restaurants where I was just a somm.” The financial aspect is a tricky one and something somms aren’t taught. To create a great wine bar or restaurant is one thing, but to make it successful is another. It’s learning to balance how to price wine in a restaurant.”

For many restaurants, curating food and wine pairings proves a lucrative and popular solution. “Putting together wine pairings is very strong in Sweden,” says 2016 Lily Bollinger winner Emma Ziemann, the ebullient sommelier responsible for Gothenburg’s Michelin-starred Thörnströms Kök wine programme. “Some argue that packages kill the somm’s job. But the biggest job today is about getting your guests to feel comfortable. That affects the wine list. We don’t sell so many bottles any more – people just go for the pairings.” She adds that the Coravin system is becoming a big factor. “In Sweden, it’s hard to get vintages. So we mix and match, working within a budget. You need to make connections, develop deals, be part of the community. Swedish sommeliers are quite competitive around allocations. But we have a very strong sommelier society here.”

Swedish somms must also juggle several roles to justify their salaries. Helena Wolff, the beverage director for Gothia Towers’ six restaurants, conducts ongoing training with staff, oversees an adjacent banquet facility and theatre, selects the hotel’s 1,200 minibar wines and still works at least one shift each week.

Brand Nordic

This pragmatic approach runs counter to the “rock star” image sommeliers enjoy elsewhere, particularly in the US. “I never understand this ‘rock star’ image,” says Robert Andersson. “Sommelier is a service profession and I am not a big fan of sommeliers who take themselves too seriously. The only rock stars should be the winemakers.”

“We don’t really look for rock stars,” says Jonas Sandberg. “Maybe we should.” In addition to running Foli, Sandberg organises Stockholm’s La Paulée Nordic 2018, a



Tina Johansson, winner, Lily Bollinger Award for Best Female Sommelier in Sweden



Jonas Sandberg, Foli wine bar



Robert Andersson, Pompette Imports



Emma Ziemann, Lily Bollinger winner 2016

collaboration with La Paulée de New York organiser Daniel Johnnes. “Sweden is very nuts and bolts. Our values are ‘you work hard, you pay your dues’,” says Sandberg. “Having said that, I love to see friends of mine become rock stars, because they can get funding for projects. But then that means they leave the floor. While I’m supportive of those other projects, you don’t want to create an environment where rock stars leave the floor.”

Why does “Brand Nordic” excel globally? “It’s a good question,” says Andersson. “First, I think we have some good sommelier schools where you learn all the basics that you should know. Then, too, I think with Jonas Röjerman winning best sommelier in Europe many years ago, and then Andreas Larsson in 2007, we younger sommeliers saw that it’s possible, so we’ve pushed each other to become better. I also believe that Sweden is a non-wine producing country, so we can taste a big diversity of wines and beverages from all over the world.”

“I think that Sweden has great sommeliers in general because we are not afraid to try new things,” says Tina Johansson. “Since our wine history is not that long, we are not bound to specific styles of wine by tradition. This has encouraged a curiosity for wines from all over the world. However, I believe that education is really important, whether you’re studying in a programme or by yourself.”

Rubén Sanz Ramiro sums it up: “Perhaps most importantly is the emotion and motivation of sharing our passion for wine and gastronomy with our guests. It’s magnificent to be able to connect to so many people every day, and be able to engage them through food and wine. I believe it is also socially important. We all need to pay more attention what we eat and drink and I like to think of myself helping to create awareness.” ■