

As part of my effort to become an intolerable old person, I have spent a lot of time learning about wine. I have a cellar and have hung wine maps all around my house. I visit wineries, read books about wine and write occasional articles about wine. I have successfully bored many, many dinner guests.

So when I heard about *Somm*, the documentary that came out June 21 about guys preparing for the Master Sommelier test, I kept wondering how I'd do on it. Then I saw the movie. The test--in which you have to learn everything about geography, chemistry, history, laws and service as it relates to liquor and then drink six wines and identify each region, grape, quality and year--is impossible. You have to be invited to take the test, and still only 10% pass. In the 36 years the Court of Master Sommeliers has existed, only 202 people have become masters. The applicants in the movie destroy their lives studying maps and flash cards for years; you can watch some of them go nearly mad. "One thing I like about our species is we always do this," the movie's director, Jason Wise, told me. "If there's a monumental achievement, we say, 'Let's cut these achievers in half.'"

The master's test is the fourth and final level in a series that gets exponentially harder at each stage. Having had too many conversations at restaurants in which it seemed like I knew more than my sommelier, I've long suspected I could take the Level 1 test cold. So I asked the court if it would let me take it without the two-day course, which it has never allowed. It said Yes, as long as I did it without any studying whatsoever. I agreed, as long as drinking did not count as studying.

I put on a sommelier-looking blazer and drove to Anaheim to meet Michael Jordan, a master sommelier who works at the Ranch Restaurant and Saloon, an amazing, 20,000-sq.-ft. restaurant and adjacent two-step dance hall that the billionaire who founded the electronics company Extron attached to his office headquarters so he'd have somewhere to go after work. Jordan teaches a four-month class to his waitstaff before they take the two-day course for the first test. His goal is to have everyone at the restaurant--waiters, bartenders, cooks, busboys--pass the first level. As of now, 12 staff members have passed the second-level exam, including the cook. Jordan has, at various restaurants, helped more than 1,000 people pass the first test. He is the Michael Jordan of wine. And by giving me the test, he was risking his 100% pass rate.

After briefly assessing my knowledge by talking to me about grapes, regions, winemaking and pairings, Jordan put me at a 75% to pass. Wise, *Somm*'s director, also thought I wouldn't have trouble. "Maybe I'm a little jaded from the master's exam, but I look at the intro as incredibly easy," he said. It's designed, he told me, so that people will pass it and want to continue.

I sat down to take the 70-question multiple-choice test and answered the first three questions immediately. And then, not so much. I can't reveal what any of the questions were--candidates are never told their test scores or what wines they tasted, only if they passed or failed--but I can say that they involved topics I'd never even thought about: sake, names of regions of South Africa, soil types, how to open Champagne and stuff about cigars. Even the facts I thought I knew I didn't really know when I wasn't just boring people but had to fill in the circle. Is that town in the southern Rhône or northern Rhône?

I finished in half the time allotted since it doesn't take long to make random guesses. Jordan took my test to the back of the room. He returned with a sad sommelier face. I needed only a 60%--a D--to pass. I did not get a D.

I was surprisingly upset, but as the charming Jordan and I shared dinner and a lot of wine, I started to feel better. He thought I was brave and adventurous and that he was lucky to be in my brave, adventurous presence. He made me feel like I was neither an idiot nor a phony, even though I now objectively know I am both.

Jordan gave me the 207-page Introductory Sommelier Course Workbook and offered to drive up to L.A. so I could take the test again. Wise told me that he thought a competitive person like me would probably want to continue. "The first and second exam are like getting a tattoo: you're either going to say, 'I wish I didn't get this,' or you're going to get 50 more tattoos."

I'm not sure which way I'll go. But no matter how many levels I pass, I fear I'll never be a great sommelier because I can't make people feel as good as Jordan does. Luckily, he told me, they teach that for the second-level test.

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