

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