

Toast of the Town

Alumnus becomes the first Mexican to earn the prestigious title of “Master Sommelier”

By Martin Haro '05

Juan Gómez '99 grew up in the small town of Campeche in the south of Mexico, where family celebrations called for toasts with beer and tequila.

Today, though, 39-year-old Gómez's drink of choice is wine, especially dry rosés, sauvignon blancs from New Zealand and pinot noirs.

As one of three master sommeliers, the title given to wine experts in the restaurant industry, working at The Breakers in Palm Beach, Gómez is held to the highest standards by the Court of Master Sommeliers. Only 96 professionals hold that title in North America. Fewer than 50 candidates apply each year, and only about 5 percent of them earn the designation.

It was at The Breakers – a AAA 5-Diamond luxury hotel with eight restaurants and eateries – that this graduate of the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management came to really learn about and appreciate a fine wine. Like most success stories, his begins at the bottom of the barrel.

Gómez joined The Breakers in 1999 as a food and beverage intern. He rose through the ranks, first as a server during breakfast at The Circle and a server, sommelier and head sommelier at L'Escalier. He is now a master sommelier at the hotel's Flagler Steakhouse.

“I worked everywhere,” he said. “I wanted to be involved and find the right department for me. I knew I had to make a decision.”

It was then that the classes he took at FIU began to play a role in his future. Gómez left the University of Alabama two years into his undergraduate career

when he decided on a career in the hospitality field. Without hesitation, he chose to become a Golden Panther and calls his time here “a great learning experience.”

“I looked for the best schools,” he said. “FIU's School of Hospitality and Tourism Management had one of the best programs in the country.”

While at Biscayne Bay Campus, he took wine classes he enjoyed but did not think wine would become his life's work. Once he joined The Breakers, and took another wine class offered to the staff, everything fell into place.

His mentor at work, Virginia Philip, the resort's wine director and a master sommelier, needed an assistant, and after he scored highly in the class, she saw him as an ideal candidate for the position.

“Juan is a sponge. Six years ago, he had little wine knowledge,” she said. “To accomplish what he has in such a short amount of time is not only unheard of, but shows his dedication to becoming a master sommelier and living the American Dream.”

For Gómez, the timing was perfect. He was inspired when Philip, who is one of fewer than 20 female master sommeliers in the world, won the title of Best Sommelier in the United States in 2002. “I took the wine class at FIU because it related to the fine dining experience, but I didn't know it would end like this,” he said.

Gómez began the rigorous process of becoming a master sommelier in 2002.

There are four levels of examination that candidates must pass to earn the designation from the Court. Before

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—
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passing the last exam in 2007, he faced three days of testing in three areas.

The first assessed his knowledge of aperitifs and his ability to serve them correctly, his positioning of glassware, and his ability to discuss menu content and wine list. He also had to demonstrate proficiency in wine serving and his knowledge of brandies, liqueurs and cigars, as well as his skills dealing with his patronage.

Then came the theory. To pass, Gómez had to become familiar with the entire process of winemaking, from the grape seed to the final product. This includes learning about grape varieties worldwide, international wine laws, vinification, storage and handling, methods of distillation and making of spirits and liqueurs, knowledge of cigar production, and the beer- and cider-making process.

Last came the practical tasting, which was scored on his ability to describe clearly and accurately six different wines. Within 25 minutes, he had to identify, where appropriate, grape varieties, country of origin, district of origin and vintages of the wines tasted.

It wasn't easy but Gómez enjoyed it.

In the future, he would like to bring the Court's courses to Mexico and Central and South America. While the days of tequila and beer are behind him, he is still helping others toast their special occasions

“What I enjoy most,” he said, “is exceeding the expectations of our guests.” ■

Freelance writer Christina Bohnstengel contributed to this story.