



# PUBLIC RELATIONS

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May 4, 2013 -- Bobby Conroy, 31, Sommelier at famed BENU restaurant in San Francisco, today won the national “2013 Best Young Sommelier” competition sponsored by the Société Mondiale du Vin USA, the wine division of the international food and wine organization Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs. Conroy competed against eight other regional winners for top honors in the national finals, held at the organization’s annual conference at the Hilton Sonoma Wine Country Hotel in Santa Rosa, CA. He will represent the U.S. in the international contest on October 18 in Washington, D.C. To enter in the competition, sommeliers must be 21 through 35 years old.

Will Costello, 30, Wine Director at Mandarin Oriental Las Vegas, Far West Region, placed second; Maximilian (Max) Kast, 33, Wine Director of the Fearington House Restaurant, Fearington Village, NC, South Central Region, came in third.

Conroy has worked at BENU since June 2011. He currently holds certification as an Advanced Sommelier from the Court of Master Sommeliers and will take the Master Sommelier exam in July. He got his first job in the hospitality industry shortly after graduating from Pallotti High School, Laurel, MD, in 1999. “I have always loved wine,” he remarked, “so becoming a sommelier was just a natural progression of working in restaurants for as long as I have.

“I really think the Société Mondiale competition is a valuable preparation for the Master Sommelier exam,” he commented. “For both of them I spend approximately 15 to 20 hours a week on wine theory, blind tasting, and service. I’m grateful to organizations like the Chaîne that take the time and effort to host these competitions. It means a lot for the growth of many industry professionals.”

The Mondiale national and international competitions are similar to the format used by the Court of Master Sommeliers. They cover Theory, Practical Skills, and Blind Tasting and are adjudicated by a panel of nine distinguished judges.

On the day of the competition, Conroy, a San Francisco resident, got up at 5 a.m., left his house at 6:15 a.m., and arrived at the Hilton just minutes before the theory session started at 8 a.m. sharp. “It was about one hour long,” he reported. “It was pretty wide ranging and covered wineries, sub-appellations within larger appellations, bottlings from top producers, varietal questions, beverage program math questions, identifying who makes a specific proprietary wine.

“Next was a blind tasting, a flight of six wines, three red, three white. We had 25 minutes and had to identify the appellation, vintage, varietal, country of origin, the climate, and define the profile of the fruit...under ripe, over ripe, the flavor components, aromas. If there was a floral component, what flowers, whether there was botrytis. It was really specific and comprehensive.”

Before the third and final section of the competition, the sommeliers were given an oral “pronunciation” exam of a list of 25 wine words. They also had a wine list to “correct,” verifying not only spelling but identifying mistakes such as an incorrect vineyard designation attribution or producer. The test on “service” ended the day. Separate “tables” covered champagne, wine decanting, and food and wine pairing, as well as cocktails.

Conroy elaborated. “If a ‘customer’ wanted a particular bottling,” he explained, “we had to know the grapes in the blend, vintage, etc. We were asked beverage math questions related to the costing of a beverage program to show we understand markups, how to operate a wine program effectively, and, bottom line, how to make money.”

A large candle was used for decanting. “Presumably it was a 31-year-old wine,” Conroy said, “but it was fabricated to have sediment. You couldn’t use the real thing...it would be about \$2,500 a bottle.

The food and wine pairing was a five-course menu, and we had to choose a wine for each course. The parameters were challenging...for example, our ‘customer’ specified a region, let’s say Spain, but not from Rioja, for less than \$70 a bottle. We did this for all five courses; and, when a wine choice was rejected, we had to come up with another idea.”

For the spirits segment, the competitors had to “nose” four spirits in snifter glasses and identify what they were only by sniffing. They were given three base spirits and had to recommend two classic cocktails for each and name the additional ingredients, with a total price to the customer of \$10-\$12. They also had practical tasks from an operations perspective—costing, how to write a bar program.

The competition ended around 3 p.m., and the winner was announced at a reception at 7 p.m. Conroy headed back to BENU, arriving a “hair or two” after 8:30, to work the rest of the evening. “I received lots of congratulations,” he said, “but there was no special partying. I got home around 2 a.m.

“It was not only an excellent competition on its own but was certainly great prep for the Master Somm exam,” he continued. “It was a pleasure and honor to compete and have success against incredibly talented people. There certainly is a significant amount of gravitas moving on to compete at the international level. It’s full steam ahead for the Master Sommelier test in July. Then I’ll hit the reset button and do the same sort of prep for the international Young Sommelier competition in D. C. in October.”

As preparation, Conroy joins other expert sommeliers for two intense blind tastings a week. They’re organized by Aaron Patrick, Sommelier at Bourbon Steak and include not only Conroy but, among others, Chris Gaither, head somm at Spruce; Jeff Kellogg, sommelier at RN74; Michael Ireland, consultant and Wine Director at Wing Tip; Chris Baggetta, Wine Director at Quince; Josh Thomas, Wine Director at Prospect. “We all aspire to be and are training to become Master Sommeliers...that’s one of the great things about group,” Conroy stated.

Charlie Bennett, CWP, CSW, of The Woodlands, Texas, Vice Echanson National, Société Mondiale du Vin, Chaine des Rôtisseurs, is Chair of the nationwide 2013 Young Sommelier Competitions. The nine judges were: Senior wine professionals Geoff Labitzke, Master of Wine and Director of Sales and Marketing, Kistler Vineyards; Tim Hanni, Master of Wine and educator, researcher, and lecturer on wine and author of

“Why You Like the Wines You Like”; David Glancy, Master Sommelier and founder/CEO of the San Francisco Wine School. Also, prior winners of the Mondiale/Chaîne national competition Christopher Bates, 2012 national and international Société Mondiale/Chaîne Young Sommelier competition winner and General Manager/Executive Chef of the Hotel Fauchere, Milford, PA; Ian Cauble, Master Sommelier, 2011 national and international Société Mondiale/Chaîne Young Sommelier competition winner, and former U.S. brand ambassador for Krug Champagne; Michael Meagher, 2010 national Société Mondiale/Chaîne Young Sommelier competition winner and East Division Education Manager, Treasury Wine Estates; and Chaîne members Peter Stiles, Chaîne Vice Echanson; Naples, FL; Richard Wilson, Chaîne Echanson Provincial, Far West Region; Arthur White, Chaîne Santa Ynez member and owner/winemaker at Arthur Earl Winery and Alexander and Wayne Winery.

Other regional winners competing in the finals were: Steven Paul McDonald, 32, Sommelier, Pappas Steakhouse, Houston, Southwest Region; Sean Isono, 31, Sommelier, Halekulani Hotel, Honolulu, Hawaii/Pacific Islands Region; Andrey Ivanov, 27, General Manager and Beverage Director, Elaia & Olio Restaurants, St. Louis, MO, Midwest Region; John Filkins, 28, Sommelier, “Wit and Wisdom,” A Tavern by Michael Mina, in the Four Seasons Hotel, Baltimore, Mid-Atlantic Region; Amanda Ozer, 30, Sommelier, Virginia Philip Wine Shop and Academy, West Palm Beach, Southeast Region; Morgan Harris, 27, Sommelier and Front-of-House Manager at Corkbuzz Wine Studio New York City, Northeast Region.

The Chaîne des Rôtisseurs has 22,000 members worldwide, 6,000 in the U.S., with chapters throughout the United States and around the globe. Two important programs of the Chaîne are the Young Sommeliers competition and a Young Chefs competition. Both encourage younger members of the hospitality industry. Additional information about the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, including the Chaîne Foundation, is available at its U.S. website, [www.chaineus.org](http://www.chaineus.org), and international website, [www.chainedesrotisseurs.com](http://www.chainedesrotisseurs.com).