



CMS-A Announces Results from Independent Sexual Harassment Investigation

The Court of Master Sommeliers, Americas announces the results of an external, independent investigation led by Margaret C. Bell of Lagasse Branch Bell + Kinkead on sexual harassment allegations regarding select members of the organization, as reported in October 2020. Ms. Bell delivered her report on the investigation to the CMS-A's Ethics and Professional Responsibility Committee in September 2021. Over the past two months the committee reviewed the evidence from each of the twenty-two individual cases, working alongside [RALIANCE](#) — a group that partners with a wide range of organizations to improve their cultures and create environments free from sexual harassment, misconduct, and abuse. Based on the investigation's findings and the committee's individual review of each case, the CMS-A has moved to terminate the membership of Bob Bath, Fred Dame, Fred Dexheimer, Drew Hendricks, Joseph Linder, and Matt Stamp, pending a hearing within thirty days according to the process required by law and the organization's bylaws. In addition, the board voted to prohibit Geoff Kruth, who resigned from the organization in 2020, from ever applying for reinstatement. The investigation's findings did not support further action in some cases, and those members have been removed from suspension effective immediately. For the remainder of the cases, the CMS-A worked with the RALIANCE team to develop varying levels of rehabilitative education to allow members to take accountability and then return in good standing.

For the [survivors](#), the CMS-A will offer dedicated, individualized support as facilitated by the RALIANCE team, which has more than 300 cumulative years of relevant expertise, rooted in the experiences of survivors.

Ms. Bell's findings, which capture the perspectives of more than 80 individuals she interviewed as part of her investigations, reinforced the critical need for the organization to implement systemic changes in its culture. The recurring themes that the CMS-A saw in the findings include the power of Master Sommeliers who were perceived to be untouchable, particularly when it came to unethical behavior or abuse of their titles; the male-dominated culture of the organization; the importance of trusted, professional mentorship by Master Sommeliers; perceptions of an unfair and secretive examination process; and the lack of a clear, trusted formal complaint process.

The investigative findings confirmed that perceived power was exploited by members of the organization. The findings substantiated behaviors that ranged from inappropriate comments and flirting to nonconsensual touching and exploiting a mentoring relationship for a perceived quid pro quo. The investigation also found that these behaviors did not impact examination outcomes, and that the examination process had proper checks and balances involving multiple members and CMS-A employees, such that results could not be influenced unfairly by any individual member.

"This reckoning in our industry and organization has been incredibly painful – most painful of all for the survivors who felt unsafe or compromised by those they trusted. From this deep disappointment and betrayal, we will continue channeling the learned lessons into growth and positive change for our organization. We understand the need for substantial healing after this traumatic period in the wine industry," says Emily Wines, Chair of the Board of Directors. "The work does not stop here. The Board of Directors is committed to creating safe mentoring spaces as well as adding more diverse voices to the

organization. We are actively working to be more transparent with our membership, students, and the larger community, and to make our examination process more transparent. We look forward to taking this moment to learn from this investigation and reimagine how we can better serve the wine industry.”

How the Investigation Took Place

Margaret C. Bell is a founding partner of San Diego’s Lagasse Branch Bell + Kinkead, which specializes in employment law, and is an independent workplace investigator for the public and private sectors. In November 2020, Ms. Bell was engaged by CMS-A’s counsel Davis Wright Tremaine LLP to lead an independent, impartial investigation on allegations of sexual harassment and coercion perpetrated by Master Sommeliers. Throughout the course of her nine-month investigation, Ms. Bell interviewed more than 80 individuals regarding these allegations.

In order to ensure a thorough and fair third-party investigation, Ms. Bell has not had any direct contact regarding the process or findings with the CMS-A Board of Directors, including those serving on the Ethics and Professional Responsibility Committee.

How Discipline was Determined

In early 2021, the Ethics and Professional Responsibility committee, co-chaired by Michael Meagher, MS and David Yoshida, MS and also including Brahm Callahan, MS and Kathryn Morgan, MS, was formed to lead the charge in rewriting the organization’s [Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility](#). The updated Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility — which was published on the CMS-A’s website and communicated to the broader membership as of April 8, 2021 — details the process by which members, candidates, and students can safely and anonymously report any misconduct or abuse via third-party provider Lighthouse Services (www.lighthouse-services.com/mastersommeliers or 833-373-0329), as well as how the process works for investigating claims and determining subsequent disciplinary action. subsequent disciplinary action.

Using the process outlined in the Code of Ethics, the committee reviewed the information Ms. Bell gathered, provided recommendations based on the findings, consulted with RALIANCE, and then presented their final recommendations to the board to vote on. All board members upon being elected submitted a list of Master Sommeliers that might pose potential conflicts of interest and were recused from the discussion and voting on those cases. The decisions to move toward termination were all based on a pattern of unethical behavior, including incidents that compromised the integrity of CMS-A’s core mission — examination, education, and mentoring — and put the safety of individuals at risk.

The revised Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility now includes a Candidate Bill of Rights, which lays out the expectations for candidates while participating in any CMS-A programming, events, or activities, as well as an updated [Non-Discrimination Policy](#) and a new [Anti-Racism Pledge](#). All Master Sommeliers wishing to administer examinations and participate in CMS-A sponsored events and activities are required to acknowledge and sign the Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility.

A Changing Culture for the Organization

Throughout the last year, CMS-A has implemented significant changes to keep its members, candidates, and students safe moving forward, which are detailed [here](#). The organization recognizes the role that its culture played in the past and that there is still a great deal of change to be made and trust to be rebuilt. As a result of these findings, as well as feedback from the community and outside consultants, the organization is continuing to build on those initial changes with additional initiatives to help work towards the goal of safety and transparency including:

- Mandatory training on preventing sexual harassment, identifying signs of a hostile work environment, and fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion required to participate in CMS-A programming
- Steps toward exam transparency and mentorship guidelines, which relates to a root cause of harassment and an imbalance of power
- Providing structured post-exam feedback reports with specific information on exam content to every Advanced and Master Sommelier exam candidate
- Four external board members will be selected with Executive Director Julie Cohen Theobald's input and direction coming in 2022
- Scholarships for 100 women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion each year

If any member of the community experiences or is aware of instances of misconduct and/or abuse as it relates to the CMS-A, the organization encourages reporting to its third-party provider Lighthouse Services (www.lighthouse-services.com/mastersommeliers or 833-373-0329).

ABOUT THE COURT OF MASTER SOMMELIERS, AMERICAS

The Court was established in England in 1977 and sets the global standard of excellence for beverage service within the hospitality industry with integrity, exemplary knowledge, and humility. The first Master Sommelier Diploma Exam to be held in the United States was in 1987. The Americas chapter, which serves both North and South America, was established in 1987. Since then, 172 professionals have earned the title of Master Sommelier as part of the Americas chapter. The title Master Sommelier marks the highest recognition of wine and spirits knowledge, beverage service abilities, and professionalism in the hospitality trade. Education was then, and remains today, the Court's charter. For more information, please visit www.mastersommeliers.org.

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