

2024 Upper Level Theory: Illustrative Examples of Questions & Answers

The following is a set of questions from the 2024 Master Sommelier Diploma Theory examination which represent concepts and levels of knowledge both best understood, and most challenging, to the candidates.

To illustrate their reconciliation within our overall curriculum and difficulty level as determined by the Examination Committee, the accepted answer (knowing we allow different phrasing and spelling when the knowledge is clearly demonstrated) and the difficulty level are provided with explanation.

In addition to how Theory supports Tasting, Business of the Sommelier, and Hospitality and Service, all curriculum and examination standards are designed to support the professional roles defined in the Expected Skill Set document ([link](#)) for both Advanced and Master Sommeliers.

Difficulty Levels: Master Sommelier Diploma Theory examinations consist of Advanced & Master Sommelier-level questions. The Advanced Sommelier Theory examination consists of Advanced-level questions with small amounts of both Certified-level (to ensure more foundational aspects are solid) and Master Sommelier-level.

We hope this helps better understand the Court of Master Sommeliers curriculum and sets standards for successful outlines of study in the future.

QUESTION (MASTER SOMMELIER, APRIL):

In the production of London Dry Gin, what is the minimum percentage alcohol by volume of the initial distillate?

Acceptable Answer: 96

Success rate: 8%

Difficulty Level: Advanced Sommelier

Why should one understand London Dry Gin's base distillate's ABV percentage?

- Gin is a double-distilled product – there is an initial and a final distillation
- Its ABV% is a foundational standard for any Distilled Gin per EU Law
- 96% is as close to completely neutral a spirit as exists – which is key when considering the relative subtlety of the primary flavoring materials (in the form of all-natural botanicals)

Other more-specific-to-London-Dry-Gin standards exist (like, when the botanicals can be added, the high percentage of pure Ethyl Alcohol, extremely low residual sugar levels, and final distillate ABV percentages) – but, while it is a distinct style thereof, London Dry Gin is a Gin first and foremost. At Introductory level, knowledge of Gin and its flavorings is expected. At Certified level, producers, cocktails, and stylistic differences. At Advanced level, distillation processes with proper terms, specific production laws for established types, more producers and cocktail usage, regions of origin, and label terms.

Topics Broached:

- **Non-Wine: Spirits**
- **Non-Wine: Spirits - Base Material**
- **Non-Wine: Spirits - Production Method**
- **Non-Wine: Law**

How it Reconciles with the Court of Master Sommeliers Curriculum:

London Dry Gin is one of the most established and highest selling spirits in the world, with clear and specific standards. It is referenced in any major spirits guide, with globally available producers and consistent placement in spirits lists and such standard cocktails as the Martini and Negroni. The job skillset requires understanding of major and unique beverage alcohol types, choosing quality versions, offering product guests demand and answering their questions regarding them, and training staff with how and why major beverage alcohol types are unique.

QUESTION (MASTER SOMMELIER, APRIL):

What is the main reason the vineyards immediately uphill from Grand Cru Chablis are classified differently?

(This was asked as a follow-up to “What level of classification is given to the vineyards located immediately uphill from Grand Cru Chablis?” Answer: Petit Chablis)

Acceptable Answer:

Change from Kimmeridgian soil in Grand Cru Chablis to Portlandian soil in Petit Chablis

(If “Cooler climate due to higher altitude and/or exposure” was cited, partial credit was awarded.)

Success rate: 49% (another 18% succeeded in naming higher altitude/exposure resulting in cooler climate)

Difficulty Level: Master Sommelier

Why should one understand the reason for the difference in vineyard classifications of this area of Chablis?

Within the topic of Burgundy, understanding the AOP quality levels and their determining factors is mandatory starting at Introductory. With Chablis, the importance of soil differences is one of two (aspect being the other) most important and established reasons for quality designation of vineyards. At Advanced level, the soil types “Kimmeridgian” and “Portlandian” must be referenced to illustrate knowledge of Kimmeridgian’s superiority. In this case, the quality level drop from the highest to the lowest within the region in mere meters/feet is extraordinary – in many other regions of the world, including Burgundy, changes in quality level designations are more gradual.

Topics Broached:

- **Country: France**
- **Region: France Major**
- **Region: Burgundy Other**
- **Geography: Soil - Type & Name**
- **Geography: Named Vineyard**
- **Wine Law: Classification**

How it Reconciles with the Court of Master Sommeliers Curriculum:

The ability to engage guests and professional colleagues with confidence in a region with such focus on vineyard classification levels is essential to upper-level professionals. Soils are established as a major consideration for wine region identity and styles. The concept of Burgundy fragmentation and its determining factors such as soil and aspect, begins at the Introductory level. At Certified level major Grand Cru, iconic producers, and a basic understanding of regional layout are present. Chablis is established in the probable Advanced Sommelier wine list for deductive tasting. Selling Grand Cru v. Petit Chablis on the floor requires ability to explain the differences in price, label terminology, and flavor.

QUESTION (MASTER SOMMELIER, APRIL):

For Vintage Madeira, what is the minimum percentage of Tinta Negra if Tinta Negra is listed on the label?

Acceptable Answer: 100

Success rate: 34%

Difficulty Level: Advanced Sommelier

Why should one understand the percentage of grape varieties in any region – and, here, specifically Madeira?

Introductory level lists Fortified wine as a unique and high quality category to offer to guests, with basic production differences, styles, and label terms. Within the topic of Fortified Wine, Madeira is a mainstay. At Certified, producers and more in-depth understanding of production are expected. Madeira names its grape varieties to indicate stylistic differences – somewhat unique in Fortified Wine. Vintage Madeira is one of its highest quality classifications and types. At Advanced level, it is important to know that any grape variety mentioned in Vintage Madeira constitutes 100% of the blend by law; this is unique in a fragmented vineyard region known for blending vineyard plots and grape varieties. Additionally, Tinta Negra has grown in quality reputation since its upgrade to “recommended grape” in 2015, joining the other four grape varieties Sercial, Verdelho, Boal, and Malmsey as listed on labels.

Topics Broached:

- **Country: Portugal**
- **Fortified Wine: Madeira**
- **Wine Law: Grape Variety-to-Region**
- **Label Term**
- **Wine Law: Classification**

How it Reconciles with the Court of Master Sommeliers Curriculum:

Fortified wines are taught to in the Introductory and examined to/tasted throughout Certified Sommelier, Advanced Sommelier, and Master Sommelier Diploma examinations. The importance of grape varieties and their role in the flavor differences in any wine is foundational. Label terms – especially ones so prominent as grape varieties and “Vintage” in Madeira – indicate important aspects of any beverage and are likely to be asked about by guests. Quality and style levels should be recognized in both theory and tasting (in either the Business of the Sommelier or Tasting portions).

QUESTION (MASTER SOMMELIER, APRIL):

What is the average yield in Priorat?

Acceptable Answer: * 4 and 10 hl/ha OR * .25 tons and .75 tons/acre

Success rate: 3%

Difficulty Level: Advanced Sommelier

Why should one understand the average yield of grape varieties in Priorat?

The wording of this question is important: it did not ask for “allowable maximum yield” (i.e. stated regional wine law) but for “average yield” – meaning, what is *actually* practiced? Assumed is the understanding of the term, “yield”. There is no official DOQ listing or law in this case; the knowledge of this is considered general, cited by numerous sources across a wide range of Priorat-based education, producer technical information, and training.

Spain is a key country in the wine world. Any investigation of Spain includes Priorat as one of the two DOCa/DOQ’s, one of the top 3 regions in quality reputation, home to iconic producers and vineyards, and some of the most expensive/collectible wines in the world. Any investigation of Priorat begins with its terrain (rocky, mountainous, higher altitudes), soils (llicorella and others, leaning toward infertile/barren), and climate (dry and warm during the growing season, continental) combining to create a difficult place with very low-yielding vines. Other factors such as increased vine age also contribute.

Additionally, this is an extraordinarily low yield, often cited as a key reason for the concentrated, structured, powerful styles of wine made in Priorat.

Topics Broached:

- **Country: Spain**
- **Major Region: Priorat**
- **Geography: Aspect & Topography**
- **Geography: Climate**
- **Geography: Soil Type & Name**
- **Grape Growing: Yield**
- **Grape Growing: Affect on Style**

How it Reconciles with the Court of Master Sommeliers Curriculum:

Grape growing and its affect on wine styles is foundational. Yields as an indication of style and quality are major wine law contributors. Major regions of major countries are taught and examined to at all levels. General terms such as “yield” are key. Explaining Priorat to a guest should mention low yields and their resultant concentrated style.

QUESTION (MASTER SOMMELIER, APRIL):

What was the rainiest growing season in Champagne from 2018 through 2022?

Acceptable Answer: 2021

Success rate: 78%

(NOTE: the phrasing “from _____ to _____” INCLUDES the endpoints mentioned. In this case, both 2018 and 2022 should be considered.)

Difficulty Level: Advanced Sommelier

Why should one understand the weather of different vintages in Champagne?

Champagne is one of the four most essential regions in France, and the single most important region of production for sparkling wine in the world. We begin teaching Champagne, including the challenges of its climate, at the Introductory level. At the Certified level, we expect additional knowledge of iconic producers, major subregions, major styles, understanding of vintage versus non-vintage champagne and the impact of climate on production, and awareness of the cru system. At the Advanced level, this depth of knowledge increases into vintage variation, additional producers, history & lore, and more. Additionally, 2021 is a recent vintage, and Advanced-level sommeliers will be encountering both 2021 vintage wines as well as non-vintage cuvées based on the 2021 vintage in their daily lives. At the Master Sommelier level, a question like this might extend to knowledge of older vintages, like identifying the most challenging vintage from 1985 to 1990 or recalling producers that released prestige cuvées in challenging vintages such as 2001.

Topics Broached:

- **Country: France**
- **Major Region: Champagne**
- **Geography: Climate**
- **Sparkling Wine**
- **Vintage: Climate Conditions**
- **Vintage: Reputation**

How it Reconciles with the Court of Master Sommeliers Curriculum:

Understanding vintage growing conditions in fundamental regions such as Champagne is expected of a sommelier in a buying and/or lead service position, to whom the community looks towards for depth of knowledge in the profession. Moreover, understanding the impact on growing conditions in a marginal region where said conditions impact which categories of wine stylistically and in price/value – including non-vintage v. vintage and proprietary wines at various quality levels - are produced on a year-by-year basis is essential.

QUESTION (MASTER SOMMELIER, APRIL):

Which of the following grape varieties is less planted in Côtes de Provence? Select from Carignan, Mourvèdre, Cinsault, or Tibouren.

Acceptable Answer: Tibouren

Success Rate: 59%

Difficulty Level: Advanced Sommelier

Why should one understand the distinct grape variety of Tibouren as it relates to Côtes de Provence?

Provence is the sixth largest growing region in France; Côtes de Provence, its largest AOP, is the most internationally significant region for still rosé production. At the Certified level, we expect that candidates can discuss the region's overall climate and topography, general styles produced, and the prevalence of multi-varietal blends. Advanced Sommeliers should have more extensive knowledge of which varieties predominate in which AOP's, as well as subregions, unique native varieties, physical features, core producers, and history & lore. Tibouren is not only a principal variety of the Côtes de Provence, it is endemic to the region and the flagship grape for one of Provence's most prominent estates (Clos Cibonne). Having the answer listed as a choice in a multiple choice format (v. having to recall it completely) also makes this an Advanced Sommelier-level question.

Topics Broached:

- **Country: France**
- **Major Region: Provence**
- **Grape Variety-to-Region**
- **Producer: Leading Producer/Proprietary Brand**
- **Label Term**

How it Reconciles with the Court of Master Sommeliers Curriculum:

Knowledge of principal grape varieties in major wine regions is expected for anyone who is selling/serving/representing wines of this core nature, doubly so if the variety in question is indigenous or rare and high quality. As our Advanced level certifies someone in a buying position or lead sommelier role, this level of knowledge is expected. This is also an example of listening skills and processing the question before rushing to an answer.

QUESTION (MASTER SOMMELIER, APRIL):

What is the range of altitude for the Cafayate region?

Acceptable Answer: Accept any numbers between 1,500 and 2,200 meters OR 5,000 and 7,000 feet

Success Rate: 11%

Difficulty Level: Advanced Sommelier

Why should one understand the altitude range of Cafayate?

Altitude is perhaps the single most important grape growing factor for the vineyards of Argentina, and as such, we begin discussing altitude at the introductory level. At Advanced level, we expect sommeliers to have an understanding of and be able to cite the relative altitudes of the most important regions of production, in addition to knowledge of grape varieties, typical winemaking styles, and major producers.

Cafayate is the most established subregional GI within Salta, itself the most important Regional GI in the north. It and its altitude are often cited on labels as its altitude greatly affects the style of wines produced within it. It, however, is unique and has a range smaller than/within the overall Salta altitude range (which was referred and answered to erroneously).

Topics Broached:

- **Country: Argentina**
- **Major Region: Salta - Calchaqui Valley - Cafayate**
- **Geography: Aspect & Topography**
- **Geography: Climate**
- **Grape Growing: Affect on Style**

How it Reconciles with the Court of Master Sommeliers Curriculum:

As the seventh largest wine producing country in the world, the wines of Argentina are ubiquitous in the market and have a significant commercial presence in both the restaurant and retail spaces. The impact of elevation on the quality and character of these wines is well-established, and can be tasted in the glass. Specific knowledge as to the geographic aspects of Argentinian wine regions is key to understanding the wines and being able to discuss their unique qualities with customers in all settings.

QUESTION (MASTER SOMMELIER, APRIL):

Name three current producers of *Cru Asili* in Barbaresco:

Acceptable Answer: All current producers. Following were most prominent, any others were researched:

- | | | | |
|------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| * Ca' del Baio | * Ceretto | * Michele Chiarlo | * Bruno Giacosa |
| * Luigi Giordano | * Luisin | * Produttori del Barbaresco | * Roagna |

(Partial credit awarded for two)

Success rate: 11% for full credit *(another 55% succeeded in naming two correct producers)*

Difficulty Level: Advanced Sommelier

Why should one be able to list three producers of *Cru Asili*?

Piedmont is an essential region of one of the core wine growing countries in the world. We begin teaching Barbaresco DOCG at the Introductory level; at the Certified level we expect additional knowledge of iconic producers, awareness of the spectrum of modern and traditional styles, foundation-level natural features and commune hierarchy. At the Advanced level, this depth of knowledge increases into vintage variation, touchstone *Cru* and vineyards, additional producers, history & lore, and more. *Asili* and *Rabaja* are two of the most important MGA's of Barbaresco. This question is similar to expecting Advanced level Sommeliers to name producers of Musigny Grand *Cru* in Burgundy, Bernkasteler Doctor in the Mosel, Hyde Vineyard for Chardonnay in California, or Montosoli in Brunello di Montalcino – iconic single vineyards made by multiple iconic producers in core growing regions.

Topics Broached:

- **Major Country:** Italy
 - **Major Region:** Piedmont – Barbaresco DOCG
 - **Producer:** Leading Producer/Proprietary Wine
 - **Geography:** Named Vineyard
- Geography:** Appellation

How it Reconciles with the Court of Master Sommeliers Curriculum:

Intimate knowledge of fundamental regions such as Barbaresco is expected of a sommelier in a buying and/or lead service position, to whom the community looks towards for depth of knowledge in the profession. Understanding extraordinary vineyards of historical significance and benchmark quality is essential in building programs and sales on the floor. Leading producers must be considered to achieve world-class and guest-demanded wine list content.

QUESTION (MASTER SOMMELIER, APRIL):

Since 2010, what vintage had the smallest amount of *eiswein* production in Germany?

Acceptable Answer: 2019

Success rate: 19%

Difficulty Level: Master Sommelier

Why should one know about quantities of ice wine production in Germany?

Eiswein as a wine style is broached in our Introductory and Certified-level curriculum; though it is a wine not regularly seen in the marketplace, it is an age-worthy, very vintage specific, classic wine considered one of the archetypes of sweet wines. Germany is its historical founder and, when it produces it, commands some of the highest prices of any wine in the country for it. Advanced level knowledge extends to regions and established producers of production, wine laws regarding processes, and grape varieties of production.

When a wine or wine style is completely linked to specific growing conditions, familiarity with factors from year to year, such as anomalies with major impact on its production, is expected of a Master Sommelier. While the span of vintages asked is large one (13 years), 2019 is a recent vintage and still on the market for other categories. It is also an historically low production vintage for eiswein. The wine style in Germany is threatened by climate change, making this a relevant and current topic of understanding. There is an effect on price in vintages surrounding it is a consideration for total inventory value and breadth of offerings on a wine list.

Topics Broached:

- Major Region: Germany
- Style & Type
- Label Term
- History & Lore
- Vintage: Climate Conditions

How it Reconciles with the Court of Master Sommeliers Curriculum:

Knowledge of growing conditions and linking corresponding terroir -> grape -> wine styles are core concepts in the Court of Master Sommeliers curriculum. Extrapolating at upper levels towards vintage variation, impact on availability, and unique wines which arise from extraordinary conditions is expected. Similar to conditions which would result in superb or limited Sauternes, TBA or SGN wines, Eiswein fits into this category.