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## Master Thesis

***How is the role of the sommelier (re)defined in contemporary times?***

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## Abstract

Wine is doubtlessly a product that arouses today interest as it is associated with the notions of complexity, mystery and luxury. As such, the sommelier seems to be very representative of these conceptions. His expertise as well as his role within gastronomic restaurants crystallize both fascination and curiosity. If the topic of wine has been largely written about (the sales, the marketing strategies, the consumer's behaviour, the bottle labels...), few researches focus on the profession of the sommelier only, who he is, what he does, what he aims at. That is why the decision has been made in this master thesis to give pride of place to the sommelier whose role is crucial in the world of wine, as he is the liaison between the wine-making process and the consumer. Hence the following research question: *How is the role of the sommelier (re)defined in contemporary times?*

The idea behind the notion of "contemporary times" was to entail the concepts of digitization, globalization and experience economy. Indeed, since digitization has affected the economy in multiple ways and brought about a lot of changes as well in the wine industry (in the sales and speculation for instance), the question was to know whether the sommelier had been affected and in which way. A strong emphasis has been made on the rise of amateurs on the social media and the impacts this could have on the sommelier profession. However, the findings overthrew the expectations, showing that the sommelier is part of a whole experience of tastes and enjoyment, anchored in a reality and in the present, working in a close relationship with particular meals and flavours. As such, he is today little impacted by digitization and by the social media. Indeed, if theoretical information is far more accessible to anyone, and if the consumers may be more informed, this latter is (1) not necessarily educated in terms of tastes and (2) most of the time trusts the sommelier's and rely on his advice as he is regarded as the wine expert. Also, the sommelier relies on his palate only and is little influenced on what can be said about such or such wine. As such, he is less a trend follower than a newness introducer. Expectations about globalization and demand for New World wines have been as well overthrown. The results showed that demand for French wines remain very strong in France both from the French and non-French consumers.

Finally, the interviews brought up multiple new insights, the three main being: (1) the qualities of the sommelier, that turned out to largely exceed the mere knowledge in wine with a strong emphasis on the relationship to the client, (2) the core idea of *experience* and (3) the evolutions of the sommelier over the years as well as the consumers' habits.

Keywords: wine, sommelier, digitization, social media, expert, globalization, experience

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## 1. Introduction

Culture is certainly one of those concepts that are employed in the daily vocabulary to refer to various activities and objects, yet being difficult to define because of the multiple elements it encapsulates. Klamer (2016) states that culture can refer to three different aspects: first, anthropology, that is what makes one particular group different from another one in terms of values sharing, second, civilization, which has to do with tradition, the works that a group of people created through the years ; and finally arts in general that do necessarily refer to a particular group but rather to a particular discipline (music, theatre, visual arts...).

Although gastronomy is not necessarily the first thing that comes up when talking about culture, it is doubtlessly part of the culture of many countries such as France. Gastronomy in France relates to culture in its anthropological sense, as many anthropologists or cultural historians showed that culinary representations throughout centuries may be typical of tendencies of political and social evolutions (Martigny, 2010). Also, it is both part of the national identity and imaginary, and as Zeldin (1981) relevantly points out, well drinking and eating are two elements that French people associate with *la bonne vie* and *l'art de vivre*. Consequently, studying the values of French people necessarily implies to evoke at some point the pre-eminence they give to the enjoyment of eating and all the discussions that go with it. This explains the decision of the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy to apply for the addition of the French gastronomy to the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage under the label of "Repas Gastronomique des Français" (Martigny, 2010).

Gastronomy can also be considered culture through its artistic and creative dimension, the third dimension that Klamer (2016) refers to. As Balasz (2001) explains, French chefs must be highly creative and possess an "art of reframing" (p.138), well-aware that it is not a matter of feeding people but of representing their nations by offering an enchanting experience, something close to the "fairy tail". The same author emphasizes the importance that great chefs feature capacities of thinking "outside the box", to combine both basic knowledge and innovation, to leave some space to their imagination in order to stand out and display their uniqueness.

The topic of gastronomy is obviously inseparable from the subject of wine. Fine dining and upscale restaurants generally evoke luxurious settings, highly groomed waiters, and this particular moment when it comes to select the wine that fits with the dish chosen. Indeed, as Reid (1989) emphasizes, wine positively enhances the taste of the meal and the overall satisfaction of the dining experience. That is why wine is not always considered an alcoholic beverage as such, but rather a sophisticated food product (Dodd, 1997). In the French imaginary, wine is considered to be a *boisson-totem* to take up Barthes' words according to whom "the French nation considers wine as a good that is particular to it, just like its three hundred sixty kinds of cheese and its culture" (1957, p.423,

personal translation). With the recognition of wine in 2014 by the Senate as part of the “intangible heritage, part of the cultural, literary, gastronomic, landscaped, architectural, economic and social heritage” (Le Parisien, 2014) and the inscription of the Champagne and Bourgogne vineyards on the UNESCO on the world heritage site (Le Parisien, 2015), wine has formally and institutionally become an element of French culture.

The literature concerning wine is plethora and covers a large range of topics (marketing strategies, consumers’ behaviours, food and wine matching etc...). This research focuses on one specific actor of the wine industry, namely, the sommelier. Based on Aspler’s definition (1991, p.41), the sommelier “is responsible for creating and updating the wine list in conjunction with the chef ; ordering products and managing the cellar to ensure proper turnover while maintaining sufficient inventory; buying wines that will improve with age; keeping abreast of consumer tastes and trends within the beverage alcohol industry ; attending trade tastings and dealing with importing agents; participating in wine promotions and training wait staff in sales, service and product knowledge.” The person of the sommelier has been studied so far through his importance for the increase of wine sales and the marketing strategies he/she implements in order to reach this goal (Dewald, 2008). However, little is written about his quality as an expert in an era when the role of experts is questioned through digitization and the oversupply of information (Arora & Vermeulen, 2013) but also about the sommelier as an artist that has to work in symbiosis with the chef in order to cope with an increasing competition between the restaurants as well as the aura he is attributed to, that may be a key element at a time when an economy of experiences has developed (Pine and Gilmore’s, 2011). Hence the following research question: *How is the role of the sommelier (re)defined in contemporary times?* The idea of contemporary times will be defined through 3 particular concepts, namely: digitization, globalization and experience economy.

It is indeed interesting to study all these three elements, as all are particular to a period that progressively starts in the 1990s and goes on today. Through the title “Welcome to the experience economy”, Pine and Gilmore (1998), precisely relate this idea of a recent change in the way of consuming. In the same way, digitization and globalization are closely linked and doubtlessly depict this period of time. Don Tapscott in his book, *The Digital Economy: Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence* (1996), describes a new era characterized by new ways of interacting between human beings (computing), which have brought about a new economy defined through twelve key elements, among which are found digitization and globalization. The author describes digitization as the switch from physical transportation of information to the conversion of this information into bits that allow people to communicate / interact very quickly from one to the other part of the world, but also to stock a large amount of information. Information is accessible to everyone and then global: “Knowledge knows no boundaries. There is no domestic knowledge and

no international knowledge. There is only knowledge" (Peter Drucker as quoted in Graham, 1997, p.263). The research will then analyse the answers of ten interviewees from three cities: Paris, Bordeaux and Lyon, important cities of the French gastronomy. Three main themes emerged from the manual coding and will be respectively developed, namely the **role of internet and the social media**, the **sommelier as an experience enhancer** and finally, the **evolutions in the world of wine**.



## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Literature review

#### 2.1.1. A brief overview of the profession of sommelier

The sommelier profession is a very old one as it is already mentioned in mythological stories from the Antiquity as well as in the Bible. For a long time, the term of sommelier did not refer to the role he has today, this role was indeed assigned to the “cup-bearer” (*échanson*) whose duty was to serve the drinks at the table of important figures. This profession has been carried on over the centuries, during the Middle Age, at a time when the cup-bearer was already considered someone in which one could put the trust in, as the risk of poisoning hovered. While the cup-bearer had to take care of the service of the drinks as well as of the supply of the cellar, the sommelier had nothing to do with a wine specialist, he was someone herding beasts of work, whose work progressively developed in the person responsible for the luggage of the journeys at the court as well as for the delivery of wine. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the sommelier was the one responsible for the setting of the table and the preparation of the wine while the cup-bearer was still endowed with the duty of the service of the wine at the table. Over the years, the work of sommelier developed and got closer to the function of cup-bearer. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the chefs of the royal tables started to open restaurants. With the beginning of the restaurant industry and the Belle Epoque, the contemporary meaning of the term sommelier appeared, at a time when the service of wine was already very codified. (Ferrand, 2016).

It may be important also to say a few words about the current career path of the sommelier, how they arrive at that position today. If there was only one school of sommellerie in the 80s., there are today multiple ways to become a sommelier. Some may start with a *Certificat d’Aptitude Professionnelle*, or *Bac professionnel* in the restaurant industry/hospitality/cooking field (Secondary Education) in two or three years, and specialize later in sommellerie by doing a *Mention Complémentaire*, generally in one year with the possibility to continue with a *Brevet Professionnel* in two years. Some may enrol directly in hospitality or wine school after the *baccalauréat* (A level). The paths to get to that profession are multiple and it is difficult to state what is the most commonly used. The persons may have arrived to that position in roundabout ways since there are many links between different programmes with possibilities sometimes to jump from one programme to the other. If no documents stating clearly the number of the sommeliers in France has been found, one source however provides information about it: the Union de la Sommellerie Française. This

association founded in 1970 and aiming at promoting the profession of sommelier counts today 1300 members and therefore gives a clue regarding the number of sommeliers in France.

The system of awards is also very present in the world of sommellerie in France: Meilleur Jeune sommelier de France, Meilleur Sommelier de France, Master of Port, Concours un des meilleurs ouvriers de France, Meilleur sommelier de l'année etc.... In the same way, the grape brooch pinned on the sommelier's suit is a way for him to distinguish himself within the restaurant and to display his status based upon the colour of the brooch (golden one for the maître sommelier, that is, after 10 years of experience). These symbols and titles doubtlessly give legitimacy to the sommelier in the eyes of the clients and are springboard for their careers, notably through the media fallouts.

## 2.1.2. The sommelier as an expert

### A. What is an expert?

Gastronomy and wine tend today to be associated with the creative industries and more especially with the taste industries, the demand of the products not stemming from a need or a necessity but rather deriving from "the logic of pleasures, tastes, ethic preferences and hedonism" (Barrère, 2013). Indeed, gastronomy and wine are generally associated with *hedonic products* (Barrère, Bonnard & Chaussat, 2014 ; Charters& Pettigrew, 2005) as opposed to *utilitarian products* and *balanced products*, the latter being a combination of the two others (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). Hedonic consumption is thus defined as "those facets of consumer behaviour that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one's experience with products", multisensory referring to the senses that are convoked with sensory inputs of the product (smell) that may invoke sensory impressions within the individual (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982, p.92).

Wine in this sense could be associated with art and some authors indeed got interested in the similarities these two may share (Charters& Pettigrew, 2005). The latter emphasized that some terms such as "complexity", "fullfilness", "beautiful" or "inspiring" were used to describe both wine and pieces of art (artwork, concert). There is the belief indeed that there are no objective criteria that allow to objectively assess the quality of an artwork, a lack of objectivity that strengthens the role of the art experts endowed with the capacity to establish the value (Arora & Vermeulen, 2013). The characteristics of experts have been largely tackled in the literature. As defined by *Shanteau* et al. (2002), an expert is characterized by the experience he gained over the years, his certification, social acclamation – some common recognition of him being an expert, internal consistency, consensus reliability, discrimination ability, knowledge but also by some

behavioural features such as self-confidence, creativity, perceptiveness, stress tolerance, communication skills. Bonus and Ronte (1997, p.110) emphasize the importance of the expert's cultural knowledge, defined as "that intuitive knowledge, based upon training and experience, that is incapable of translation into written form". Peder Zane (2013) adds another dimension to the definition of the expert applied to the context of wine, arguing that a true connoisseur does not only possess knowledge, as scholars, but a sixth sense, namely taste, allowing him/her to "identify and appreciate subtle, often hidden, qualities." Regarding the similarities between art and wine, both in terms of aesthetic, creativity but also as luxury goods, it may be interesting to apply the question of the experts in the art market to the wine market. Arora & Vermeulen (2013) got indeed interested in the role of the art experts in the age of digitization and social media when the opinion of amateurs tends to gain more and more importance, a "crowd wisdom" that might create tension with the experts. As stated by Marty (2007) about the art world, consumers are no longer mere passive recipients but rather active participants, thus potentially jeopardizing traditional gatekeepers (Arora & Vermeulen, 2013). The latter draw several conclusions, namely that (1) digital participation of consumer is not incompatible with the adherence of hierarchical structures, (2) that the possibility of anyone to give their opinions does not result in a fairer assessment of quality, (3) that the limit between experts and amateurs remain, both in terms of knowledge and institutional linkages (4) that breaking down the barriers between experts and amateurs is neither positive nor inherently democratic. However, the question may be still relevant to study as if art and wine share some similarities, they are still two different topics facing different challenges.

## **B. Globalization, oversupply of information and the importance of experts**

As stated in the introduction, it appears that the emergence of internet largely contributed to the process of globalization as it offers a platform where the same information has been made available all over the world. The openness of internet to everyone also brought about an oversupply of information, so much so that it can be difficult for the user to find "good" information and determine the one he can trust or not. The same phenomenon is as well observable in the field of wine. Indeed, the barriers to write about wine have become lower, and everyone who has an access to internet can easily and quickly write about the topic, an idea well depicted by Bailey (2010), stating that "wine critics and bloggers, professional and amateur, are mixed up in a social media web". Thus, at a time when the amount of information has never been that much substantial, the difficulty is for the "good" information provider to get the attention. Of course, the question arises about: what is "good" information? How objective is the assessment of wine? Indeed, some blind tastings (the most

emblematic one being the Judgement of Paris in 1976) revealed that expensive wines were sometimes rated lower than more cheap others, showing that the judgment may be influenced by the brand or the country of provenance. However, if opinions about a wine may differ as tastes differ among people, assessing a wine still requires an education of the palate in order to properly be able to be aware of its complexity: "I'd be the first to agree with Tim Hanni that everyone's palate is different. But I also think that wine tasting is something you need to practise. (...) You wouldn't expect someone who's been playing the piano for a year to tackle a Chopin Prelude, so why should wine be different?" (Atkin, 2010).

Thus, regarding the fact that tastes differ, finding "good information" could be as Atkin (2010) suggests, namely asking oneself the question whether you like the wine you have in your glass and determining whether the recommendations of the "educated palate" helped you to answer "yes" more frequently than "no". The issue however, may be for the "educated palate" whether they are professionals or well-trained amateurs, to signal themselves as trustworthy. Indeed, as stated by the wine critic Robinson, there is a need today to fight in order to have sufficiently accurate knowledge and gain the readers' trust but also, and mostly, to fight for attention. This idea relates to Lanham and the economy of attention (2006) arguing that attention today has become the scarce resource and the products that manage to draw the eyeballs (get the attention) are also the ones which are the most likely to make money.

But the question of finding the "good information", that is the one provided by an educated palate that will fit your taste, may be even more challenging in the case of the sommelier. Indeed, what is interesting with this idea, is the fact that it can be assumed that even the connoisseurs may benefit from the advice of the sommelier since it is not only a matter of drinking a good wine, but drinking the right wine that fits the chef's menu. Therefore, even if the consumer is well-informed about wine, the idea of information asymmetry is still present as the sommelier already knows the menu and chose the wines accordingly. Of course, some experimented customers will have already some ideas about which type of wine will better fit certain type of food, but the role of sommelier can be precisely to find *the* wine, or even to surprise the customer by offering another match than the one generally expected.

This would be then relevant to study whether this oversupply of information makes the sommelier asked for more guidance, if the consumers already have well-defined ideas and how open they are to the sommelier's advice. However, what is interesting to notice is the fact that the sommelier also relies on the consumers' preferences when selecting the wine for the wine lists (Ben Dewald, 2008). Consequently, we may ask the question whether the sommelier is defined through his role of guide, trend follower or newness introducer.

Digitization and the oversupply of information also echo the concept of globalization and the competitive environment this created in the wine industry. As expressed in Campbell and Guibert (2006), the increase of the output of New World producers and the quality of their wine challenge the Old World producers. Also, internet contributed in making new wineries noticed and promoted, leading to a far larger choice for the consumers. Thus, the trends are changing, and if the most popular brands in 1990 were Old World wines, those which are the most popular ones nowadays come from the New World (Campbell and Guibert, 2006). As stated by these authors, wine consumers are more willing to experiment new wines rather than stick to the traditional ones. Consequently, it may be interesting to study the questions of how the sommeliers balance New and Old worlds wines, if the consumers are still attached to French wines and on which occasions the consumers decide to choose such and such wine. Indeed, as expressed by Holl, Lockshin and O'Mahony (2001), the choice in the purchase of wine really depends on the occasion (for instance, the brand of wine is really important for business dinners in order to make an impression), while they would maybe more willing to experiment a wine in a more intimate circle. How do sommeliers choose their wines based on their consumers (age, nationality, occasions)? What is the proportion of New World Old World Wine? Are they advising "traditional" wines for particular occasions and New World wines for others?

## **C. Digitization**

### **a. The rise of amateur (bloggers) and the decline of wine experts**

As it is the case in the world of art, amateurs took the floor in the world of wine to express their opinion on digital platforms on Web 2.0, an element specific to a "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006 as quoted in Arora & Vermeulen, 2013). The number of bloggers in the field of wine indeed considerably increased, with more than 1000 wine blogs compared to only a handful in 2004 (Bailey, 2010), a phenomenon particularly noticeable on Twitter where micro bloggers are growing in terms of influence (Scott Rosenberg, 2009 as quoted in Marlowe et al., 2017). Wine has thus switched from a topic considered for a long time to be an elitist institution (Bailey, 2010) to a topic regularly discussed in the mass and social media (Wilson & Quinton, 2012). This idea is well expressed by the wine critic Jancis Robinson (2015): "Back in those days, wine used to be one of those subjects about which ordinary people in anglophone countries would hesitate to express an opinion. It used to be left to us, experts, to tell ordinary tasters what to think and how to describe those thoughts. But now wine has definitely lost its elitist veneer."

An interesting element pointed by Bailey (2010) to explain this growth of digital content dealing with the topic wine (apart from the democratization of option provided by the social media), is the idea that wine is, by nature, a social product. Indeed, wine, whether cheap or expensive, is drunk with friends, over a nice meal, during party between friends, during family / business meetings, on the occasion of wine tastings etc... As expressed by Wilson & Quinton (2012), the product of wine necessarily implies socialisation and community building by the pleasure it provides to share wine experiences. According to Cochran (2010), wine and Twitter share similar values, namely the very idea of community building and argue that both the health of social media and wine industry rely on the strength of their respective community and the importance of the network within these communities. Consequently, social media reinforce this sense of community which is part of the wine experience and the importance of people part of the wine industry to be as well present and active on social media (Wilson & Quinton, 2012). This very idea may also refer to what Klamer (2016) calls a *shared good*: “The practice of a shared good consists of all activities and interactions that are directed at generating, sustaining and valorizing the good.” Wine engages thus a practice (conversation) among those who have knowledge about wine, and these have to contribute to the shared good (sharing of knowledge, experiences etc...) in order to “sustain, enjoy and add value to the shared good.” (Klamer, 2016). As such, possessing knowledge, claiming to be a connoisseur today is valuable as it enables to stand out: “As ideas increasingly become the coin of the realm, people distinguish themselves by what they know.” (Peder Zane, 2013).

## **b. The success of (micro-)bloggers and what they discuss**

We may wonder who these bloggers are. As expressed by Brown et al. (2017), they consist mainly on individuals that are not affiliated with the professional wine industry but still are “becoming the new opinion leaders in wine” (Oregon Wine Board, 2014 as quoted in Brown et al., 2017, p.1). These individuals are generally not interested in earning money from their activity as bloggers, and derive their motivation from the passion they have for wine (Brown et al., 2017). Indeed, non-commercial bloggers seem to have acquired knowledge about wine from consumption experiences such as wine tasting, but also touring in wineries or thanks to their networking with wine experts, while commercial bloggers generally emphasize their advanced training and their specific knowledge about the product (Doyle et al., 2012). As there are no official rules regarding the publications, everyone is allowed to express their own opinions that may contradict with the statement of another blogger (Thach, 2010). Thus, the wine industry professionals have no power of selection of these non-expert blogs as the followers only determine whether the content is good or not (Brown et al., 2017). It appears that with the development of blogs, peer selection tends to

cohabitate with expert selection, a selection system that started to dominate the visual arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wijnberg & Gemser, 2000). In the same way, as expressed earlier, the wine industry has been for a long time dominated by experts, as wine was deemed to be too complex to be properly valued by anyone. Today, if – as it will be explained later- wine experts still have a role to play, bloggers also influence their peers, the idea of peer influence being defined as the capacity to influence the opinion, action or behaviour of an individual (Mangleburg et al.,2004), who in this case would generally be an amateur of wine. Relating this to the topic of the sommelier, it might be interesting to ask the question: To what extent are the sommelier impacted by such bloggers that seem to launch trends? The success of these amateur bloggers may be first explained by the fact that they are expected not be commercially biased. However, their “amateur” profiles may also hinder their reliability and trustworthiness in the eyes of the consumers (Doyle et al., 2012). In addition, wine is also sorted as these products on the web for which supplementary information is necessary for people who want to purchase them (Leskovec, 2007); that is why blogs play an important role for some consumers to help them in their choice (Thach, 2010). Indeed, the consumers may perceive a certain risk in their purchase of wine, due to the large choice of brands and the complexity of the product (Bruwer et al., 2013). This perceived risk can be defined as “the uncertainty that consumers face when they cannot foresee the consequences of their purchase decisions.” (Schiffman et al.,2011, p.197). If Bruwer et al. (2013) make clear distinctions between six perceived risks, based on Schiffman et al. ‘s categorization (2011), namely, financial, functional, time, social, psychological and physical, the most important ones in the case of wine are the first five. These five however can be reduced to two main, that are time and financial ones, the latter entailing the psychological (self-confidence), social (opinion of friends and family) and functional (taste) perceived risks. Indeed, the more the consumer is confident about the taste and the opinion of his friends/ family, the more likely he is to put a higher price in a bottle. Pang and Lee (2008) emphasize the idea that the opinion of others can be really important for the decision-making, as it provides further information. This idea may be even more applicable to the purchase of wine because of the risks it presents. Regarding the crucial role social influences play in the purchase of product, it is understandable why social media and the possibility of interactions it offers, can also really influence consumer in their purchase of wine.

Following the same idea, it is interesting to point out that the reviews of wines appear to be the most common topic of blogs, as Thach’s findings show that it represents 33% of a sample of 222 blogs (2010). However, the sample may be too small to make a strong statement. The same authors also showed that brands are largely discussed, including small wineries and less famous brands. This is a relevant element that may be due to the independence of the bloggers from commercial purposes, allowing them to a more unbiased assessment.

### c. The sommelier and the social media

It appears that social media gave also the (young) sommeliers stronger influence and participate in giving them a voice that tends to be sometimes even more powerful than critic's ratings (McCoy, 2017). Among all the social media, Instagram is one that is largely used by the sommeliers, especially in the US. Through this practice, "Insta-somms" may contribute to the promotion of the restaurant their work in by highlighting a particular wine on a caption, by informing the followers about the daily specials or about the wines from the cellar (Schiessl, 2017). But it is also a way to share the wine experience with the followers by adding tastings notes, forging them some sort of connections with their "audience", but also to educate them about less-known wine and contribute to their promotion (Schiessl, 2017), all the more if the Insta-somm has a large number of followers. According to Rambourg (2016), sommeliers have become superstars in New York where the culture of wine highly developed and democratized. These wine experts are the ones who launch the trends by sharing their experiences and favorites on the social media. As explained by Rambourg (2016) this rising influence of the sommelier is also partly due to the end of the Parker era. Indeed, while a couple years ago, clients based their choice of wine on Parker's ratings only, the customers today are largely open to the opinion of the sommelier and sometimes even go to a particular restaurant not for the sommelier him/herself. Thus, as stated by Arnaud Tronche, a French sommelier in New York « Quand je poste sur Twitter un avis sur un vin dégusté au restaurant, j'ai des clients qui arrivent quelques jours plus tard, ils ne regardent même pas la carte et m'en demandent. (...) Maintenant tu es presque obligé de le faire, c'est devenu incontournable » [When I post on Twitter my opinion about a wine I've tasted at the restaurants, I have some clients who come here a couple of days later ; they do not even have a look at the wine list, they ask me for it.(...) Today, you're almost compelled to do so, it has become essential.]

However, the authors previously quoted in the former paragraph are all referring to the US where the culture of the social media may be even more present than in Europe. This may be interesting to study whether the sommeliers in France have seen their influence increased with the rise of the social media, and if there is a difference compared to the sommeliers in the US, in the way they use them. Also, as stated earlier, the sommeliers seem to be the ones who launch the trends today in the US. It would be interesting to see whether this is the case as well in France or if the sommelier needs as well to adapt to what the consumer wants, or maybe to the trends launched elsewhere (the US?) and of which the customers in France heard about thanks to the social media.



### 2.1.3. The sommelier as an experience enhancer

As expressed in the introduction, the strong and deeply rooted attachment of the French people to gastronomy stems from a long tradition of culinary pleasures and *art de vivre*, still constitutive today of an identity symbol and national pride (Martigny, 2010) and participating in building around the world the reputation of the *bien manger* “à la française” (Barrère, Bonnard & Chaussat, 2014). In a time when countries and cities are in competition to attract tourists, gastronomy appears to be an increasingly important element that influences the choice of destination (Richards, 2002). If this competition happens between countries and cities, this is also noticeable between the restaurants themselves, where the chefs have to handle a lot of pressure and consistently ensure the high quality of what they offer (Johnson et al., 2005). In this context of competition, several authors emphasize wine as a differentiation strategy as a good wine list is the parameter to judge the restaurant quality and considerably enhances its reputation (Berenguer, Gil, & Ruiz, 2008 ; 2009). More than the wine offer, the capacity of matching wine and food improves the dining experience (Berenguer, Gil, & Ruiz, 2010) and the consumer satisfaction, participating in building the reputation of a particular restaurant (Harrington, 2008).

#### A. The idea of experience economy

As expressed by Johnson et al. (2005), gastronomic restaurants sell an experience to the consumer. The context of competition has increased the importance for the chefs to demonstrate outstanding creativity and culinary skills in order to provide distinctive dining experiences (Johnson et al., 2005). This obviously relates to Pine and Gilmore’s concept of *Experience Economy* (2011). The two authors argue that the economy indeed moved from a market selling, in a first place, commodities, then goods, then services to a market selling experiences. As explained, these experiences are closely related to the very individuality, and may stimulate the person on an emotional, physical, intellectual and even spiritual level. The “product” is no longer tangible or intangible but *memorable* and the industries offering experiences have to dedicate their effort in the creation of unforgettable memories for their consumers. Engaging all the senses is for Pine and Gilmore, one way of making these experiences unforgettable and this is precisely what is noticeable in the dining experience and considerably enhanced by the presence of a sommelier. Then it may be interesting to point out that if the sommelier is of course necessary to magnify the experience through a right pairing, he also benefits from a certain aura that has a knock-on effect on the image of the restaurant.

## B. The setting, the codes

The dining experience is not only about the gustatory quality, each detail matters: from the atmosphere, the dishes, the wine to the service which all have to display the finest quality (Balasz, 2001). This author argues that everything must appear as luxurious as possible in order for the customer to feel special and unique: “The secret of attracting guests (and getting them to spend a non-negligible amount of money) is to make them feel like Cinderella at the ball, giving them the chance to spend a few hours in a world of beauty, luxury, and exclusivity, far from life’s ordinary realities.” (p.142)

As stated previously, there is no French upscale restaurants without a good wine list. Aune (2002), puts forward the idea of *enchantment* and explains that the capacity we have to relate ourselves to culture and history, considerably enhances the feeling of magic we derive from the dining experience: “When we open or have a bottle from one of these Chateaux [Château Lafite Rothschild, Château Margaux, Château Petrus] opened for us in a restaurant, we smell the bouquet, taste the richness of the wine, and somehow feel the culture which we now are a part of. We are enchanted in several ways, because we know we can only afford the wine at this astronomical price very occasionally, so the setting for opening such a bottle is already a very special one” (p34-35). In the same way, some famous restaurants whose names have been mentioned many times in magazines, newspapers, have become true brands and even benefit from an “aura”. Consequently, the very idea of knowing that we have diner in one of those restaurants considerably boosts the feeling of enchantment as we are aware of the status this gives us in the eyes of others (Aune, 2002).

Also, wine being considered a luxury product, the status of a sommelier as an expert of such a refined product, generates a certain admiration. Therefore, the sommelier is partly responsible for this luxury image both through the selection of high quality wines but also through his/her very presence within the restaurant that is used as quality signal. In that way, the sommelier has been very empowered. It appears indeed, that the context can highly influence flavours perceptions and the overall emotional experience (Ferrarini et al., 2010). Consequently, having around a well-groomed and highly qualified individual always amenable to the consumer’s need doubtlessly enhances the experience, something reinforced by the very codified process, the protocol, of serving wine (the setting of the glassware, the uncorking of the bottle etc...), that makes the consumer feel privileged as he/she is aware of being part of something complex and special. This could be associated with the concept of “*distinction*” emphasized by Bourdieu, considering the fact that some individuals tend to set apart from others by visiting fancy restaurants. It may be then interesting to study these codes and their importance for the general experience, addressing the question of the

place of the learning of these codes in the training of the sommelier, and whether this role grew in importance with the apparition of the experience economy.

### **C. Innovation and creativity**

As pointed out by many authors (Aspler, 1991 ; Berenguer, Gil, & Ruiz, 2008 ; 2009), the hospitality industry has become very competitive and the wine list may be used for differentiation. Berenguer, Gil, & Ruiz (2009) found out that an excellent wine list needed to be extensive, specialized and imaginative/innovative, and rightly balanced with tradition. Unfortunately, there is no clear definition in this article of what these adjectives mean and it could be interesting to go back on those meanings in the interviews. For instance, does the innovation mean serving a little known brand, or matching a particular wine with food in a new way?

It appears that the sommelier is necessary for any prestigious restaurants in order to stand out and maintain the reputation. As expressed by Barrère (2013), competition makes chefs engage in a race for creativity. The chef is no longer someone who knows cooking excellently but who finds combination of new flavours (Barrère, 2013), and, like a composer, arranges “notes” to create something new (Harrington, 2008). But, if the chef must be creative, the sommelier needs to be as well. Wine and food must achieve synergy, so that the “combined effect of the whole is superior to the sum of the individual parts” in order to create “a new and superior gastronomic effect” (Harrington, 2008). We could then wonder what kind of sommelier profile a restaurant may look for? What makes a sommelier a good one? Is this creative part an important? How balancing innovation and tradition?

## 2.2. Method

### 2.2.1. Research design

The research question: *How is the role of the sommelier (re)defined in contemporary times?* suggests a qualitative field research relying on an inductive and interpretative approach. The topic being difficult to quantify, field research appears to be the adequate procedure to get a better understanding of the practices and opinions of the sommeliers (Babbie, 2011). This question has been answered through in-depth and semi-structured face-to-face interviews (Bryman, 2012) led in French in order for the questions to be better understood and for the answers to remain as close as possible to what the interviewees have in mind. The attribute of the interview method lies in its flexible aspect (Babbie, 2011) which is important in this research. Indeed, the semi-structured interviews, by providing a guideline, allow a certain comparison between the answers, while leaving a certain leeway to tackle the particularity of each sommelier and restaurant.

The interviewees have been reached via the restaurants and CAFA websites themselves, via Facebook for two sommeliers and with the use of the *Annuaire des Maîtres Sommeliers de l'UDSF 2014*. The method of criterion sampling (Bryman, 2012) has been used to select the respondents, the criteria was therefore to be labelled as a "sommelier". Since one aspect of the research focuses on the role of the sommelier within the restaurants, it was also important to find enough sommeliers who had an experience in a gastronomic restaurant. The questions as well as the consent form have been sent several days before the interviews in order for the interviewees to get acquainted with the topic. One must keep in mind that, due to the too small size of the sample, the level of saturation has not been reached and additional interviews would be required in order to get to the theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2012).

For convenient reasons, the interviews focused on three cities only, namely Paris, Bordeaux and Lyon, all of them carrying weight in the world of wine and gastronomy. Indeed, the three regions of Ile-de-France, Aquitaine and Rhône-Alpes only, total up 240 out of the 611 Michelin-starred restaurants in 2018, that represents about 40% of the Michelin-starred restaurants (<https://restaurant.michelin.fr/guide-michelin>). The guide Michelin is the main reference in terms of quality in the French world of gastronomy, and thus provides an interesting framework for the topic. Besides, these three cities are relevant to consider as they are emblematic in the fields of wine and gastronomy: Paris, as being the capital of France, is an international touristic hub and closely related to the idea of luxury ; the region of Bordeaux necessarily has to be mentioned when writing about wine as it is the second largest vineyard of France and the provenance of many of the most prestigious wines, such as the Saint-Emilion, Château Mouton Rothschild or Château Margaux. Finally,

Lyon is a key city for the topic for it has been holding the name of “capital of gastronomy” since 1935 (La Gastronomie Lyonnaise, s.d.) and the home city of the “pope of gastronomy”: Paul Bocuse.

### **2.2.2. Describing the sample**

Ten in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted over three weeks (April, 25<sup>th</sup> to May, 9<sup>th</sup> 2018) in Paris, Bordeaux and Lyon with a total amount of 11'15 hours interviews. The face-to-face interviews enabled to get spontaneous answers and further details in case of misunderstanding ; all of them have been recorded and transcribed in the original language. The interviews were conducted in French, the respondents' mother tongue -one excepted-, for the interviewees to feel comfortable and be more accurate in their answers. However, nuances are unavoidably lost in the English translation of the quotations. Though, one of the concern was not to paraphrase the answer in order to remain as close as possible to the original meaning and to the syntax.

Four interviews have been conducted with sommeliers currently working within a gastronomic restaurant, one with student doing his study training in a gastronomic restaurant, two with independent sommeliers, another one with a former teacher and lecturer, one with a teacher in sommellerie at the CAFA -hotel management school in Bordeaux-, and one finally, with an oenologist and head of the sommellerie program at the CAFA. In total, eight out of the ten respondents have an experience as sommelier in a gastronomic restaurant. It has been possible to interview only one female sommelier due to a majority of males in this sector and the unavailability of the other sommelière that has been contacted. Also, it has been interesting to interview different sommelier with varying years of experience, half of them being between 20 and 40 years old, the other half between 40 and 65 years old. As such, this parameter may affect the way they approach certain topics, such as internet for instance. Also, these were the most likely to talk about the evolutions in the world of wine, from the sommelier's as well as from the consumer's side. Moreover, it was interesting not to limit the interviews to full-time sommeliers in gastronomic restaurant, and to get as well the responses of a oenologist, a student and a teacher that provided new insights in the training of the sommelier and a more global perspective on the world of wine. Appendice A gives additional information concerning the interviewees.

### **2.2.3. Coding**

The findings of the various interviews have been coded manually without the use of any software, and have been sorted out based on Saldana's (2009) method. The exploratory aspect of this research accounts for the use of this method in order to find out the core elements already pointed out in the theoretical framework or emerging from the interviews themselves. The coding proceeded with an open coding to pinpoint the concepts, that led to an axial coding (Bryman, 2012) in order to establish some connections between the ideas and gather them in more global categories. Then, the selective coding (Bryman, 2012) resulted in the building of interrelations that gave rise to new and inherently coherent categories – the themes- encapsulating the previous elements -sub-themes. Finally, all of these data have been analysed through the filter of the literature in order to discover to what extent they do comply or break from the expectations and hypotheses. Appendice B gives further details concerning the coding process.

### 3. Results and analysis

#### 3.1. Theme 1: Regulations, internet and the (social) media

The increasing number of wine bloggers, the development of wine applications, the easier and quicker access to online documentation, the oversupply information ... internet doubtlessly brought about multiple changes and evolutions in the world of wine. Internet has thus been a topic of discussion with the interviewees concerning their use of the social media, the impact of digitization in their work and the emergence of a “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006 as quoted in Arora & Vermeylen, 2013). Another aspect that emerged when discussing the topic of internet, was the regulations in France regarding alcohol and the impact such regulations had on the consumption of wine. Therefore, this first theme will be developed in two parts: first, **the regulations and impacts**, then, **digitization and the use of (social) media**. The question of the media in general such as advertisement or TV programmes is also tackled below since the issue has been raised by several interviews, enlarging therefore the topic.

##### 3.1.1. Regulations and impacts

It may be interesting to develop in the first place an idea that has been mentioned by several of the interviewees, that are the regulations concerning alcohol in France, notably the “Loi Evin” that has been stirring the debate since its enacting in 1991. Among others, the law resulted in a stronger control of the advertising of alcohol (and tobacco), and the interdiction for the movie theatres and the television to broadcast alcohol advertisements. The Loi Evin has been relatively eased since 1991 with the willingness of Emmanuel Macron, Minister of the Economy at that time, and some senators in 2015, to make the distinction between *advertisement* and *information*. As such, reports and articles related to the notions of cultural, gastronomic and landscape heritage, of *terroir* or *savoir-faire* should no longer be considered to be advertisements (INPES, 2016).

The impacts of the French regulation about alcohol were discussed during four interviews and different issues have been raised. They all agree on saying that it was necessary to make a clear distinction between wine and the other alcohols: “People tend to lump together wine and the other alcohols. All the wine advertisements are banned. Wine is the second resource in France after aeronautics and we are put a curb. We no longer have the right to advertise wine as we were allowed to 20 years ago.” (I2). Indeed, as stated by Naiman (April, 2018), wine is the second export sector in France and totals up 13 billion of turnover. Also, despite the relaxing of the law in 2015, censorship in TV reports may still happen: “I had the opportunity to participate to TV programmes

about wine, long parts of which have been cut when broadcast.” (I1). Additionally, this censorship and the reluctance to talk about wine in the media seem to hinder the modernization of the sommelier. As expressed by I7, chefs are today given pride of place in the media with the number of culinary TV programmes that grew over the past few years: “We, on the contrary, with the loi Evin, are not able to truly inform the public about the work of the sommelier. And it’s quite a shame, since there would be the possibility in these TV programmes to build a relationship between the chef and the sommelier. This would enable the sommellerie, on one hand, to modernize, and on the other hand to attract more young people. In fact, we are facing now the issue of a decrease in the number of sommeliers in the restaurants”. Regarding these regulations, some interviewees pointed out the importance of the social media as a place where the discussions about wine is freer: “The social media are finally the only place where we are allowed to talk about alcohol, about wine.” (I2).

The loi Evin also goes hand in hand with the drink-drive laws and campaigns that considerably impacted the consumption of wine in restaurants: “The clients today are really careful, careful of their figure, careful of not taking the wheel after having drunk alcohol. I have some tricks to persuade the client. When there are four people sitting at a table that do not want to drink wine because they are taking the wheel afterwards, I tell them that there are not four wheels in a car. I’m provoking them of course. But the regulations make things extremely complicated for the people. They do not know how many glasses of wine they can drink.” (I2). It appears thus that the consumption of wine has decreased in the restaurants over the past few years, with people surrounded by plenty of information that participate in giving a negative image of wine: “It’s a French issue. We do not manage to dissociate certain drinks from others. It’s a kind of melting pot that does not encourage people to drink, so that the consumption of wine has been dropping over the 30 past years.” (I6). However, two sommeliers pointed out that the election of the president Macron may slightly restore the image of wine as he is the first president in a long time, that knows something about wine and does not hesitate to display his taste for the wine culture, being thus opposed to a hardening of the Loi Evin.

### **3.1.2. Digitization and the use of (social) media**

Besides the media and the importance of social media to circumvent censorship, the question of the use of the social media by the sommeliers have been raised in the interviews. The analysis of the data showed that the interviewees have a relative use of the social media in their work.

Concerning Facebook, three sommeliers expressed different opinions: while Facebook appears rather outdated for one sommelier, another respondent declared using Facebook most of



the time to create events, specifying that Facebook events generally have little fallout. Finally, a third interviewee emphasized the necessity of very regularly updating the Facebook page. However, the two latter mostly highlighted the importance of the clients' reviews (Facebook, Goggle, Booking.com, Tripadvisor). Indeed, as reported by Fong (2010), the consumers' online reviews account for the second highest influence in the decision-making process of web users, the word-of-mouth being the first one. According to Deuze and Bruns (2007), the rise of internet caused a major shift in the way journalism is perceived, and a new form of journalism – what the authors call “citizen journalism” – has emerged, the content being no longer created by professional journalists that are deemed to be biased, but by the users themselves. In fact, a survey conducted in 2007 on Tripadvisor users (Gretzel, 2007), shows that the users enjoy the other travellers' comments as they appear more reliable, up-to-date and make easier the process of decision-making by lowering the risk due to uncertainty. “Today, you can be the best cooker ever, but if you're not on Tripadvisor, if you don't get comments, you're going to be lost in the crowd. (...) It's also important to answer the clients that leave a comment, especially when it is a negative comment. If you don't follow this, the number of stars go down and the clients are not coming anymore. A 5-stars hotel on Tripadvisor will get far more bookings than a 3-stars one. The better you are ranked, the more clients you have. Today, everyone is running after Tripadvisor stars.” (I4). Another respondent made the same statement, arguing that a negative comment may have terrible consequences on the hotel and pointed out the double-edge aspect the reviews, especially in the case of fake reviews: “You have to be very careful, to dissect everything and to provide evidence if it happens to be a fake news. (...) Today, there is one person at the hotel whose job is to keep update with the reviews on the social media and to answer the comments whether they are negative or positive.” (I2). It is interesting to notice that the answers are very indicative about the indivisibility between the restaurant and the sommelier, the latter identifying himself to the restaurant, as part of it, showing how the sommelier is an integral part of the restaurant's identity itself. Indeed, it is difficult for a restaurant to claim to be gastronomic without the presence of a sommelier working in and creating a wine list part of the trademark of the restaurant. Therefore, the respondents' answers bespeak this idea by not limiting their responds to the role of the sommelier, talking instead on the behalf of the restaurant/hotel itself and raising the challenge they, as a team, may face.

Regarding Instagram, only one of them declared being very active on Instagram, an activity being even quite recent as he started using it not sooner than a year ago. It is also interesting to point out that the respondent is Canadian. As such, we may associate this interest to an influence of the American culture of the social media, especially in the US where, as previously stated in the literature review, some sommeliers are very active on Instagram (Schiessl, 2017). “Facebook is outdated. It's for family, for friends, not for the work. So, I've started to post some pictures on

Instagram (...), after a couple of weeks hundreds of sommeliers started to follow me. (...) Now I have many contacts of sommeliers around the world.” (I4). For this sommelier, the use of Instagram enables to boost the image of the restaurant as it targets a trendier and younger clientele. Also, this allows to attract foreign consumers: “If there are some American or Canadian sommeliers coming to Bordeaux and wonder where they are going to have dinner one night, they know that they can find an English-speaking sommelier here. It’s the same for my Brazilian assistant. There are plenty of Brazilian amateurs of wine that are following him and are coming on purpose to the *Chapon Fin* because they know there is a Brazilian sommelier working here that can speak their language.” (I4). The respondent also explained how Instagram can be a powerful tool to network with the wine growers. Indeed, they know that their wine is going to reach a large community of people if posted on the Instagram account, and are thus willing to sell their bottles to the restaurant at a lower price. The use of Instagram has been mentioned by one other respondent only, explaining however, that he is even reluctant to post pictures of the wine he tastes and that his account is therefore barely active: “I don’t feel like saying “today I’ve tasted a Château Mouton-Rotschild or a Château Latour. I’m not here to show off” (I2). It has been also interesting to see that one interviewee who actually has a fairly active Instagram account haven’t mentioned it in the interview. What is noticeable between his account and I4’s account is the fact that while the second one most of the time relates the pictures to the restaurant he is working for, it is generally not the case for the first one. What appears is that the sommeliers generally have an online presence via the account of the restaurant rather than via a personal account.

The interviews also brought interesting information to put into perspective with the literature review concerning the rise of amateurs on internet and the influence of wine critics, as well as the importance of the wine experts regarding the oversupply of information. Regarding the rise of amateurs’ wine blogs, one interviewee agreed on the fact that more and more non-experts take indeed the liberty of giving advice to other consumers: “There are many people who visit these blogs because these are easy to understand and to get access to. Today, what matters is to quickly have access to something. If you are in a supermarket, in front of many different wines and you don’t know anything about it, you’re likely to try to find a website, a blog, or anything where you can find information about the wines you have on the shelf” (I7). However, according to the same respondent, this can be problematic since these opinions are generally not objective: “You don’t need to be a genius to give your opinion about the wine you’re drinking, because taste is something very personal. However, when it comes to advising people in their purchases, it’s different. (...) Certain wines have some flaws. You may like the flaw, but if you are unable to recognize and identify it, you may advise consumers to buy a flawed wine. Only a specialist is able to have this critical eye because he has been trained to do so.” (I7). This idea of objectivity in wine is particularly interesting

to point out and relates to the question already raised in the literature review, namely: how objective is the assessment of wine? If we may reproach art of lacking objective criteria in order to properly evaluate the value of an artwork (Arora & Vermeulen, 2013), it appears that the value of a wine relies on objective elements that are independent from the personal tastes: "A wine can be a good wine even if I don't like it." (I9). Consequently, the main downside concerning wine amateurs expressing their opinions on the internet would lie in the lack of objectivity, a quality that is particular to the expert.

However, if amateurs' opinions may influence the purchase of other consumers barely informed about wine, it is necessary to qualify the impact they have in the world of wine. Indeed, two respondents pointed out the fact that good amateurs of wine generally get their information from reliable and accurate sources, most likely to be experts' reviews. Blogs are generally addressed to the general public, since the access is free and the information easier to reach and understand. Also, it is important to remind that the blogs are not necessarily run by amateurs since experts do run blogs as well, and it is therefore difficult to make the statement that amateur bloggers are undermining the role of the experts. Further research concerning the proportion of expert bloggers versus the proportion of amateur bloggers as well as a study about the reader profiles of these blogs would be interesting to conduct in order to go deeper into the topic. In any case, neither the role of the wine experts -critics included- seem to be jeopardized by the new online community of wine amateurs as these experts seem to be very influential for good amateurs and in the professional world ("Shops and restaurants are going to take into account the experts' opinions about the different products." I6). According to another respondent, the critics have grown to be very influential, not much in the world of gastronomic restaurants, but rather in the world of speculation. The world of sommellerie -because the purchase of wine is closely linked to the chef's cooking- seems to remain separate from other sectors of the wine industry. Indeed, to answer the question raised in the literature review: "To what extent are the sommelier impacted by such bloggers that seem to launch trends?", it is interesting to notice that the sommeliers working in the restaurants do not feel impacted, whether by amateur bloggers, professional bloggers or critics: "I do not generally pay too much attention to what the critics say, or if I do so, I'm not necessarily taking note of what they say. (...) I'd rather rely on my own palate and directly visit the wine grower to understand his/her philosophy, work and to see the vineyards" (I1).

## 3.2. Theme 2: The sommelier as an experience enhancer

In a context of experience economy, the idea of the sommelier as an experience enhancer has been tackled in the interviews through different topics dealing with the notions of competition, creativity and differentiation. Also, the question of what it means to be a good sommelier today has been raised and the aspect of the relationship with the client emerged and has been largely tackled. Therefore, four topics will be developed below, namely: the **qualities of the modern sommelier**, **competition and creativity**, the **creation of the wine list** and finally, the **experience of diner and wine-drinking**.

### 3.2.1. The qualities of the modern sommelier

To the question *According to you, what are the qualities required to be an excellent sommelier?* various elements have been brought up, with a slight and sometimes blurred distinction between those associated with the relationship to the clients, and those not directly associated with the clients and rather inherent to the personality of the sommelier. The first quality, highlighted by seven respondents was the great necessity of being *humble*: “As soon as someone knows or claims to know something about wine, he/she becomes the centre of attention. (...) There has been a kind of mystery created around the wine, a sort of curtain of smoke, so much so that there are some people who don’t even dare expressing themselves when they’re tasting a wine. All this fuss around wine, this mystery, has to fall. There’s nothing magical. It’s only a matter of learning.” (17). The same idea has been confirmed during the interview with the student: “The sommeliers tend to go to their head when they start having knowledge about wine. But you can’t go to your head when you are a sommelier. We do not know. We are consistently learning. (...) I make mistakes every day. The wine-food pairing is never perfect.” (18).

Considering, the wine-food pairing, four sommeliers really emphasized the importance of precisely knowing the cooking, the slightest differences about the flavours, a quality without which mastering the pairing is impossible: “How are you supposed to properly match the wine with the food if you do not know about the flavours? You should be able to tell what fleur de sel is, what Guérande salt is, what is Himalaya salt is.” (14). In the same way, a sommelier is not only an expert of wine and is supposed to know very well the other drinks as well, since he takes care of the service of drinks at large: “A sommelier has to be an expert of every kind of beverages, whether it is mineral water, tea, coffee or biers...” (12). Therefore, he should be able to have a global understanding of the gastronomy itself from the most complex meal and flavour to the most basic drink.

Generally speaking, most of the respondents agreed on the fact that the sommelier has to be curious about everything, curious about tastes of course (“When I go to another region or country, it is important to taste the local food and wines” (I2) ) but also curious about cultural heritage, art, history: “The sommeliers are people who do not confine themselves to knowing the wines, they also have knowledge in other fields such as history” (I10) since the clients are “fond of historical anecdotes” (I8). Thus, general knowledge appears to be very useful in the relationship with the client: “There are some clients coming in our restaurant before going to the opera, so it is important, if you want to bond with the client, to have knowledge in arts” (I4). Besides, it is interesting to point out that the contest “Meilleur Ouvrier de France sommelier” includes questions about general knowledge (I9). This clearly shows that a good sommelier is expected to have this culture, it is anchored in the very definition of the profession.

The work of the sommelier appears thus to largely exceed an expertise in wine. As the sommelier never stops learning and has to keep informed about the food, about the wines, about culture, he mostly needs to be passionate about his job. As several interviewees explained, being a sommelier is very constraining in terms of working-hours and requires apart from the work in the restaurant, to visit the wine yards, to participate to the wine fairs, wine events... “The sommelier really has to be passionate about his job. The service is one thing, but the work also implies washing the glassware, organize the cellar, spending time in the office. You have to enjoy this as well. And you need to be eager for learning, otherwise you stop learning and you stagnate.” (I4). That is also why four respondents pointed out the necessity for the sommelier to have a good memory in order, first, to remember the information he is consistently learning, but more importantly, to have a memory of the tastes. “Being a sommelier requires to have a good memory, to remember emotions, instants. Much as you’ll eventually know the designations of origin by dint of reading books over and over again, it is more difficult to remember a taste. If someone makes you taste a wine you found exceptional and serve you the same wine six months after, it should ring a bell and you should be able to say “I’ve already tasted this wine six months ago”. Also, you need to have a good memory to describe a wine to a client or to tell the differences between two wines, between a Château Latour 1978 in comparison to a Château Latour 1982 for instance.” (I1). Another respondent made the same statement and included as well the parameter of the client: “If a client tells you “You served me a wine three weeks ago, I would like to order the same one”, you should be able to remember what it was.” (I2).

The sommelier’s qualities mostly lie in the way he/she deals with the client. This aspect has largely emerged from the interviews and brought up a new element that has not been much discussed in the literature. “Sommellerie is about knowing wine but also about knowing human beings” (I7). All the respondents agreed on saying that the work of the sommelier is mostly about

figuring the clients out and adapting to their needs. One respondent indeed explained: “When we start working as a sommelier, the technique is 85% of the job and psychology only 15%. But after a couple of years, the psychology part prevails over the technique one, and it ends up with 70% psychology. Based on a couple of words, looks, on the way the client behaves, you should be able to understand what kind of person you have in front of you, his/her mood, what he expects and what he/she needs” (19).

Managing to balance technique and psychology is something that has been pointed out by six respondents and happens to be also related to the notion of humbleness, previously developed. It has been first emphasized through the importance for the sommelier to use an accessible vocabulary when expressing himself about wine: “As soon as you agree with the idea that wine is about sharing, you need to make sure to use the words that can be understood. A lot of sommeliers love the sound of their own voice and blow their own trumpet. That’s not the point at all!” (13). The same idea has been expressed by other respondent: « The sommelier has to be able to tell the things that the client needs and not to recite very complex theoretical information. These are very important, you have to know them, because some clients will ask for them but most of the time the client does not know about wine. So, if you start talking about geology, ampelography, wine-making, cosmos...you won’t be understood. (...) There’s a need to desacralize the world of wine and to popularize the language of wine so that the product can be understood by everyone.” (15). But this process of adapting the language to the client appears to be mostly present with the young sommelier. The student himself admitted: “I tended to be very theoretical in the beginning, because that’s what we learn at school but with the experience, we learn to be less technical”, something that has been confirmed by I4, former sommelier teacher: “I’ve seen sommeliers who, as soon as they realize that they have knowledge in wine, want to show the client that they have a good grasp of the topic. But the client does not really care about this theoretical knowledge, he just wants to drink good wine at a good price.” More importantly, four respondents emphasized the capacity of the good sommelier not to convey complex theoretical knowledge but rather an emotion and to be able to tell an anecdote about the wine he is serving in order to arouse the interest of the client, hence the importance to know historical anecdotes (18). As Aune (2002) explains, history can indeed be a way to market the wine, entertain the client and bring enchantment to the dinner experience.

This ability to adapt to the client has been expressed in very different ways by the respondents. It entails first the capacity to offer the wine (the drink) that would fit the client’s tastes. This may seem obvious, but it requires to interpret the client’s words that may sometimes lack of accuracy. “A client might say “this pinot noir is very tannic”, even if it is the less tannic grape variety. But they may mean «sharp » (...). It’s our role to find them something else, maybe, as it happens, something very tannic and they may love it. You just have to translate what they are asking for and

serve them what they want" (I4). Also, the sommelier has to adapt the client's budget: "It something that often happens with young people. The man wants to please his girlfriend – or the other way around- but they do not know much they are supposed to pay for a bottle of wine. Most of our wines are between 30€ and 80€ and it's our role to find the bottle that will provide them the best emotion according to their budget." (I1). Another respondent (I8), confirmed this idea, stating that the goal is not to sell the most expensive wine but the wine that the client will enjoy. Generally speaking, the sommelier has to pay attention to the price of the wine he sells regarding the menu that has been ordered: "A sommelier that does a good job should manage to sell a wine that does not exceed the 2/3 of the meal." (I10). Apart from the budget, figuring the clients out also means, understanding the occasion on which they are coming to the restaurant so as to adopt the proper behaviour. Indeed, if the type of wine ordered is likely to differ between a business dinner and a family dinner (Holl, Lockshin and O'Mahony (2001), the sommelier also has to behave differently. A respondent (I2) indeed argued: "If the client is with his/her family, we can discuss a bit, if the client has a business dinner we won't disturb him, if the client is seducing a woman or the other way around, we won't disturb them either. We have to understand the situation, it's not easy but with the time, we manage to do so. And the clients are all different, so we consistently have to ask ourselves the question."

Finally, paying attention to the client's nationality may prove to be very important for the overall experience. Indeed, habits generally differ between the countries and the sommelier has to take into account this factor: "I'm teaching my colleagues that they have to serve cold water to an American client. It's not possible to serve room temperature water. It's cultural. (...) American clients who come here generally want to drink wines from the region. And I know that the American palate likes robust wines, very powerful, very fruity. I won't propose them a 2013 wine because they are slightly acid. I'll go for a wine from 2015, 2010, 2009, 2005... "solar" vintages. While I'll opt for wines from the 2013, 2014, 2012, 2008, 2007 instead, if I have a client from Amboise, because he/she is used to drinking Turenne or Chinon wines. They won't look for a high-alcohol wine." (I4) The respondent thus emphasized the importance for the sommelier to travel around the world in order to soak up with different cultures and get a better understanding of the clients' needs. This also should make the sommelier able to adapt his behaviour based upon the client's nationality. The same respondent (I4) indeed explained the differences between the American/Canadian and the French clients: "It's not a problem with American clients to touch the shoulder or the forearm, even if you've been knowing each other for one hour only. It's not embarrassing to ask about the family, the age, the salary. It's a way to have a deeper discussion, to gain the client's confidence. In France, it's just unimaginable." In the same way, the importance to speak different languages has been emphasized by three sommeliers as an element enabling to bond more easily with the client.

This idea of gaining the client's trust turned out to be a recurrent element in the interviews since six respondents highlighted this idea. One respondent (I2) largely dwelled on this idea, on the importance to show interest in the client: "When there is a client that has a particular accent, I say to him/her: "Don't tell me anything, I'll try to guess the country you are from!" and the client is really pleased because I'm curious about where he/she comes from, about his/her life. It is all about winning the client's trust. It is essential". Therefore, striking up a conversation, entertaining the client, gaining the client's confidence seem to be as well the role of the sommelier within the restaurant and aims at offering the best possible experience.

Finally, one respondent, beautifully summed up what being a good sommelier means: "A good sommelier is someone who animates the restaurant, who has to be theatrical without being "bling bling", who has to entertain the client through the wines and gastronomy. It's someone with a great deal of sensitivity concerning the dishes and the wines, he is passionate, irreproachable in the service, and knows how to share his knowledge. He must be very well organized and a gifted speaker. He has to bring stars in the eyes of the clients. He must be clear, expressive, not too loquacious and efficient. He knows how to make the dinner a special occasion through his dexterity around the decanter, the glasses, the tray. The sommelier is the ambassador of the wine-makers, the last link in the wine chain. We have to be elegant to honour all the work that has been done beforehand and showcase the wines in the most beautiful way." (I5).

### **3.2.2. Experience, competition and creativity**

The sommelier as such appears to be a core element of gastronomic restaurants as he contributes to making the overall experience more pleasurable, not only regarding the enjoyment of the dishes, but also regarding the atmosphere of the restaurant and his presence is therefore a plus for the restaurant. Indeed, if the literature review pointed out the fact that the sommelier participated in giving an image of luxury to the restaurant, a new idea emerged from six interviews, namely, that the sommelier is also regarded to be someone who liven the restaurant up. Indeed, one respondent explained: « I'm coming once the dishes have been ordered, after the director. I am the last element before the service really starts. People often say to me: "Ah! Here comes the man we were all waiting for ». I find it funny. We are considered to be the cheerful person of the restaurant, the one who always has an anecdote to tell, the one you can laugh with. People are expecting that from me, and it is my role to do so." (I1). This image may also stem from the fact that the sommelier is obviously associated with the wine, with an alcohol and thus with the idea of joviality. The sommelier appears to be someone the client feels close with, as he is the one who generally lightens the mood



and willing to discuss with him: “The relationship between the client and the sommelier has always been a bit special because we are part of the world of wine and it is a world people are interested in. There is always a client that will ask you for advice: “I have this bottle in my cellar, should I drink it or not? I’m going to that particular region this summer, could you give me the address of a wine-maker? My grand daughter was born this year, what bottle should I buy? It’s personal so the relationship is necessarily special.” (I9).

The previous quotation relates to what has been already pointed out in the literature review, namely that the world of wine tends to intrigue people and arouses both admiration and questionings. This may result from different elements: first, from a sacralization of the product, what I7 called “mystery” or “curtain of smoke” that has been created around the wine, subordinated to the idea of a complex beverage that only a few can master ; secondly, because wine is associated with scenes of conviviality, with the notion of pleasure. Two respondents clearly emphasized this idea: “People find this job fascinating. If you draw a list of the 10 best jobs in the world, you’ll find the sommelier. It’s because of being paid to drink wine. People like this idea a lot. When I tell people that I am a sommelier, I’m bombarded with questions.” (I5) “People always tell me “Wow! How do you do that? Your job is the greatest one etc...” They exaggerate a lot” (I1). All these representations around the wine, certainly lead people to have a special interest in the sommelier when dining at the restaurant and enable to start a discussion, resulting in a more personal relationship between the sommelier and the client.

This personal approach between the sommelier and the client doubtlessly enhance the overall dining experience. As pointed out in the literature review, Balasz (2001) explains how the dining experience is not only about enjoying a nice meal: every detail, whether in the service or the atmosphere matters. It is also interesting to notice that one respondent (I1) used the same analogy as this author, namely, that the clients should feel like in a fairy tale when having dinner at a gastronomic restaurant: “When people enter the restaurant, it should be something else than merely going to the restaurant. Experience is the key word. People should feel like in a Disney movie” (I1). The whole setting, service and atmosphere should consequently ensue from this idea. Six respondents clearly used the term of *pleasure* to describe the experience. “Being a sommelier is loving the persons you have in front of you, and wanting to provide them pleasure. We are here to make their dinner as pleasant as possible (...) They must leave the restaurants with stars in the eyes.” (I7). In the same way, the student argued: « When a client asks me for advice I ask him first what could please him. Then the rest follows. The most important thing is that the client enjoys his time at the restaurant. You must have this willingness to please the client, even if you’re not selling him the most expensive wine.” (I8). Therefore, it is important for the sommelier to be very rigorous in his work in order to remain close to perfection. “When we work in the world of luxury, we cannot afford

to make any mistake. For instance, forgetting to cross out a reference on the wine list. If we forget to cross out a reference, a client might order a wine that we no longer have in the cellar. And the situation is serious because it will annoy the client. And we are not here to annoy him. We are here to give him pleasure.” (I2). This rigor also includes perfectly knowing the cellar of the restaurant as well as keeping track of the maturing time of the wines: “When people come to gastronomic restaurants, they want to live an experience and everything should be properly settled to offer them this experience. Drinking a too young wine would be missing out on a piece of this experience.” (I1). Finally, two respondents brought up this idea of pleasure coupled with another element: competition: “Can you imagine how many restaurants there are in the city or even in the street? When a client crosses the doorstep the first thing you should do is thank him for having chosen your restaurant and not another one. You should honour the client until he leaves and being willing, above everything else, to please him.” (I3).

Six respondents agreed with the idea of a fierce competition between the restaurants and the importance of having a sommelier, or at least someone that knows about wine, in order to stand out. One respondent argued that having an excellent wine list and cellar served as a strategy of differentiation, something that confirmed the statements of many authors (Aspler, 1991 ; Berenguer, Gil, & Ruiz, 2008 ; 2009): “People who regularly go to gastronomic restaurants are generally wealthy people, so they appreciate drinking good wines. Let’s say they are dining at our restaurant and have dinner the week after in a gastronomic restaurant where the wine list is less substantial. Well, they will certainly decide the next time to come here because the wine list was great. (...) For instance we have a large collection of Mersault, we must be in the top 5. Regarding the Château Latour, the older we have dates back to 1978 and the youngest one to 2009, we have at least 25 vintages. And people who are reading the wine list are impressed.” (I1). Another respondent emphasized not only the wine list, but also the possibility to ask the sommelier for advice, as a plus for restaurant: “There are plenty of places where people can go to eat and which are less expensive than here. But what do we add? We add a plus in the selection of wines and in the service. It is far less stressful for the clients because we are here to help them finding the wine that will please everyone, fit their budget and enhance the dining experience.” (I4). Also, having a nice wine list appears to be a way to stand out in the eyes of international clients who do know the reputation of the French gastronomy and wines, and therefore want to have the best possible dining experience: and this implies going to a restaurant whose wine list is exceptional. “It is important to be noticed by foreign clients who are quite reluctant to come to Paris because of the terrorist attacks. The supply being huge, we have to find our niche on the market. We have to offer the best.” (I1). However, one respondent slightly qualified the idea that the presence of a sommelier enables to stand out: “Of course, it’s a plus for the restaurant to have a skilful sommelier. He will bring further recognition but also a response to

the client's needs. (...) But people are coming here to eat. The most essential thing is to propose excellent dishes. Then, you have excellent dishes and a great décor. Then excellent dishes, a great décor and a smiley staff. Then excellent dishes, a great décor, a smiley staff, a skilful sommelier and substantial cellar. And the more you make a string of pluses, the more the clients get interested in your restaurant." (I9).

The idea of creativity and renewal has also been pointed out as elements that enable to stand out in the context of competition. While Barrère (2013) emphasized the race of creativity the chef has to engage in, in order to remain competitive, one interview also pointed out the importance of the sommelier to be creative as well and pointed out different elements that participate in making the restaurant dynamic: changing the glassware, putting the spotlight on after-dinner liqueurs as a way to create a specificity of the restaurant and purchasing nice furniture to aesthetically enhance them (I1). However, the respondents stated that the creative part in their job remained fairly limited. It mostly concerns the creation of wine list for which the sommeliers clearly have to demonstrate creativity.

### **3.2.3. The creation of the wine list**

The topic of the creation of the wine list as well as the selection of wines, is a subject that has been largely developed in the interviews, notably to pick up on the notion of creativity. What has been mostly pointed out is the necessity to have a wine list that could meet the expectations of all the different clients and would fit any kind of occasion. "We really strive for creating a wine list that corresponds to any kind of profile. I think there are a couple of references to necessarily have in the cellar. It is not conceivable for a gastronomic restaurant to only have a hundred references on its wine list because it won't cover up all their clients' requirements." (I1).

All the sommeliers argued that a good list card requires to diversify the types of wine. This confirmed Holl, Lockshin and O'Mahony 's idea according to which the choice of wine will largely depend on the occasion (2001). The respondents indeed agreed with the fact that it is essential to have famous names, particular regions, especially for clients coming to the restaurant for business purposes: "During business diner, the person who invites the others want to impress them. In the case where they would appreciate the wine without having advanced knowledge, they would go for a white wine from Bourgogne and a red wine from Bordeaux in 99% of the cases. Because the Bourgogne wines have a certain aura and wines from Bordeaux are a safe bet. People know how they taste like and won't be surprised. You'll never be disappointed with a Bordeaux. You may not have the best experience in your life, but you'll rarely be disappointed. But you may be disappointed with

a red wine from Bourgogne. So, with a Bordeaux, the person knows that he is not taking any risk. They have to impress the others, they cannot allow themselves to make a mistake, and the name of the wine has to speak to the others as well. Also, the Bourgogne enables to start the dinner with a shiny touch.” (11).

On the contrary, and as expected in the literature review (Holl, Lockshin and O’Mahony, 2001), people were said to be more open to less famous names when the context is informal: “It’s rare for the other kind of clients to choose a Bordeaux. They are more willing to discover something new, like wines from the Vallée du Rhône or from the Languedoc.” (11). Six respondents pointed out the sommelier as someone expected to “open new doors” (13), to suggest less famous names and get the client willing to discover wines they do not necessarily know about, even if they may be reluctant or have strong feelings about such or such wine, or such and such wine-food pairing. “When the clients choose themselves the wine, they often go for something they already know, so there is no surprise and it prevents them from discovering something else. So, it’s our job to open new horizons. And they know they can rely on us because we know the products very well.” (19). Proposing less famous brands is also a way to find alternatives to the client that would still enhance their diner experience and cannot necessarily afford famous brands: “Today, there is far more speculation in the world of wine that there was before. Therefore, there are some vineyards today with which it is difficult to work with because the demand is very high. Also, the price of wine has been increasing these past ten years, and it is our work to find new vineyards to work with which are less famous in order to propose affordable wines on the list.” (19).

Consequently, the sommelier has to include a large variety of different wines, from different regions and enable the client to discover less famous names from regions that they are not necessarily used to drinking: “I am from Bordeaux, I am quite chauvinistic, but I will never advise only wines from Bordeaux, it would be catastrophic and precisely what should not do a good sommelier.” (17). Therefore, it is the role of the sommelier to build up a cellar with a large range of wines that taste differently. As such, they would be more able to surprise the client with new flavours and enhance the experience. “There’s no point of having 30 Côte Rôtie on the wine list if 25 of them taste the same. However, if you have 30 Côte Rôtie, more than half of them being different, this is interesting because it may match a client’s taste, a dish, a season” (19). The same respondent put forward an identical argument regarding foreign wines: “What interests me in foreign wines is the differences of taste they may offer. There’s no point of offering a Chardonnay, a Merlot or a Pinot noir that comes from abroad and tastes the same as a French wine. Foreign wines may have certain particularities especially regarding particular grape varieties such as primitive or zinfandel. But the demand for these wines remains low.”

It has also been interesting to ask for the kind of wines tourists from other countries chose when visiting France. To this question, the interviewees agreed on saying that they generally ask for French wines since they are here to enjoy the French gastronomy and culture. "For the tourists coming to Bordeaux, I try to have some good classic wines from Bordeaux so as to highlight the wines from the region. Today, a group of people came here to have lunch, there were Brazilian, English, American and French people. All people from abroad chose wines from Bordeaux. The French people from Bordeaux already know these wines, so they picked up wines from Alsace, Roussillon, Languedoc and Bourgogne. The Bordeaux wines only represent 45% of the cellar here, not even half of it. I found a wine list from 1955 and there were only Bordeaux wines. Here we have wines from everywhere in France, and a couple of foreign wines." (I4). It is thus interesting to notice that French people won't generally order foreign wines, they would rather be open to discover wines from different regions of France: "French people prefer French wine (...) the demand for foreign wines is still low in France (...). French people are quite chauvinistic, they are proud to drink wines from their country, they want to keep the French economy going." (I1). As such, two respondents (I2 & I5) brought up the information that foreign wines represented only between 4% and 6% of the wine list. This contradicts Campbell and Guibert's statement (2006) according to which consumers are more willing to experiment New World wines rather than stick to the traditional ones, at least it is the case in the gastronomic restaurants. If there may be an increase of the output of New World producers and quality that may challenge the Old World producers, the sommeliers are clearly concerned about promoting the French wines and working with French wine-makers.

### 3.3. Theme 3: The evolutions in the world of wine

It has been interesting to discuss during the interviews, the aspects that may have evolved in the world of wine: the clients' tastes, the role of the sommelier, the perception of the sommelier himself from the clients' side, the possible democratization of wine. Indeed, these topics have been raised up in the literature review notably with the accessibility of the information on the internet and the idea that the world of wine is more open to non-experts as it used to be the case. In a first part, the issue of the **democratization of wine** will be tackled, then the question of the **consumers** will be addressed, finally the **personality of the sommelier** himself will be dealt with.

#### 3.3.1. A relative democratization of wine

Regarding the rise of amateur bloggers on the internet and the accessibility of information, the questions have been brought up whether people are more informed about wine than before, and why there were more people that got interested in that topic. On the whole, the respondents agreed on saying that people are indeed more informed about wine than before as they can access the information far more easily, and are as well more interested in the topic. "When I started to work in the field of wine, the sommelier was the only one who knew about wine and the client had relative knowledge about it. But the world of wine have been democratized, there are more and more magazines, professional papers, wine fairs that are open to anyone. So the client knows more than he did before. The relationship with the him is therefore different as both the sommelier and the client have knowledge in wine." (19). Generally speaking, the interviews stated that the easy accessibility to information is the reason why people have a better grasp of the topic than before. However, this idea has been qualified by three interviewees, stating that even if people are more informed, they are not necessarily more educated about it. "Deeply speaking, I would not say that they are more educated. Everybody knows that it is necessary to smell the wine before drinking it. But they do not necessarily know why." (13). In the same way, another sommelier argued that if people may be more informed about wine, people's palates today are not necessarily more trained: "People have more knowledge about wine because it is easy to have access to the information. They know about the vineyards, the percentages of grapes etc... however they are not necessarily educated about wine. Being educated means to have trained your taste. Everyone was born with the same nose, what matters is to develop it." (12). Therefore, many respondents explained that if the consumers are more informed about wine than before, they still ask for guidance to the sommelier in most cases as they trust the advice of the sommelier and his expertise on the wine-food pairing: "7 tables out of 10 do not have a look on the wine list. They want to enjoy the experience at most and

therefore they trust us.” (I1). Indeed, it is one thing to have theoretical knowledge about wine, but the dining experience is above everything an experience of tastes, something that is more difficult to develop than the gaining of theoretical knowledge. The demand for the sommelier’s guidance has not decreased and his advice may also allow to reduce the asymmetric information. Indeed, the sommelier, contrary to the client, both knows the meal and the wines since he has tasted the meals and bought wines accordingly. Also, his expertise of tastes provides him legitimacy in the eyes of the clients. As explained by Bruwer et al. (2013), the consumer may perceive a certain risk in the purchase of wine as it is a complex product, a risk that is significant especially as the bottle is expensive. In the context of the restaurant, this risk is double since the meal and the pairing with the wine are unknown. The sommeliers who holds all the cards is thus regarded as a risk reducer all the more since he managed to gain the client’s trust.

Regarding the reasons why people got interested in the world of wine, several elements have been brought up: wine as a play activity (visiting the vineyards, tasting wines), the connotation of tradition and history it suggests, but also the idea of luxury it is associated to. Therefore, it is required for a certain category of people to have knowledge in wine in order to feel part of the high class of society. “There are more and more young people that get interested in wine especially in the grandes écoles. Wine is a luxury product so when you are a business man you have to be acquainted with wine.” (I3). It is interesting also to associate this new interest in wine to an evolution in the way the product is consumed today. Indeed, two sommeliers emphasized the idea that wine moved from a product of regular consumption to a luxury product associated with the idea of special event and occasion. As such, this confirms the statement of one sommelier (I2), according to whom, people are generally interested in the world of luxury and as soon as wine is considered as being part of it, it necessarily draws the attention.

### **3.3.2. The evolutions from the consumer’s side**

The first change that may be pointed out regarding what has been previously developed consists of an evolution in the habits of the consumer. Wine is no longer drunk everyday but for special occasions: “I remember my grandmother drinking a glass of wine everyday for lunch and dinner. (...) Today you pay greater attention to the bottle you buy, it has nothing to do with the table wine you’re drinking everyday. Today, wine is associated to a special occasion and event. People drink less but they drink better wines.” (I5). As stated previously, this decrease in the consumption may also be related to other factors such as the regulations as well as a stronger concern for the health and the figure, that implies to drink less alcohol. Regarding the preferences in the tastes and the trends, the

responses were however really various: a trend concerning the Bourgogne, a taste for fruity wines, for bitterness, for acidity, a rise in the consumption of rosé. Concerning organic wines, the respondents argued that they were indeed developing but that the demand in the restaurants remained still quite low.

In the same way, two respondents pointed out the weight of traditions in the French culture, especially in the way of matching food and wine and how these habits tend to fade away. “For more than a hundred years, people were eating cheese with red wine. During family dinner, the best bottles of red wines were opened at cheese time. Recently, we realized that the pairing cheese-white wine was actually far better” (I2). These traditions were said to be still quite present especially for the older clients. Also, if four respondents pointed out that the clients were in general more open to the sommelier’s advice than they were before, one interviewee argued that some old people happen to be still very suspicious: “We sometimes have a bad image in the eyes of old people because the sommeliers some years ago tend to push the clients into drinking wine and were mostly here to make money. So generally, they prefer choosing themselves. And they do not want to have wine by glass as they do not trust us about when the bottle has been opened.” (I4).

### **3.3.3. The evolution from the sommelier’s side**

This latter idea brings the topic to the way the role of the sommelier has evolved over the years. Three respondents emphasized the idea of a sommelier far less cold with the clients, someone on the contrary that is willing to get to know the client and concerned about pleasing him and being trusted. “The sommelier is no longer this “crow” all dressed up in black that used to scare the clients who were secretly telling themselves “There is a sommelier, this restaurant must be expensive and they will certainly try to sell us expensive wines.” (I10). And the sommeliers themselves appear to be willing to move from this image of the stiff sommelier to someone close to the client. What is interesting to point out is the fact that the contests in the world of sommellerie still insist on the codes in the service of wine, but the sommeliers in the practice generally want to distance themselves from these codes.

Finally, the future of the discipline has been discussed, highlighting a possible decrease of the number of sommeliers willing to work in a restaurant. Two elements have been brought up to explain this idea: first, the fact that there has not been a democratization of this work as it has been the case for the cooking (“There are not as many young people who are willing to become sommelier as young people that want to become a chef or pastry chef. And it’s because there have been TV programmes that participate in desacralizing it and make it fun. We cannot do the same for the



sommeliers" (17).), secondly, because working in a restaurant happens to be very constraining in terms of working hours can make this work unattractive for the young generation of sommeliers ("The sommeliers from my generation knew what to expect from this work. But the professional world has evolved since then, the 35 hours, working time reduction... There is a gap between our work and some other works and it's not easy for the young sommeliers to find their place in this system" (19). Therefore, it appears to be some mutations in this world with a renewal regarding the job prospects: "There are some sommeliers who have been working in restaurants the first years of their careers because it was the only way to go. Today, barely half of the sommeliers decide to work for a restaurant. Most of them want to teach or to work as consultants, to work for a castle etc.... The profession of sommelier is far more diverse today than it was 15 years ago." (16).

## 4. Conclusion

This research discussed different aspects of the sommelier profession, aiming at answering the following question: *How is the role of the sommelier (re)defined in contemporary times?* Generally speaking, the interviews largely exceeded the topics discussed in the literature review and brought up new insights. What has been first interesting to discover, is how the impact of internet and the social media in the profession of the sommelier has been fairly minimized by the respondents. Indeed, the literature review dedicated a long part to the different ways internet and the social media may have affected the world of wine, leading to the hypothesis that the sommeliers were as well impacted by them. It seems that the sommelier has a niche market in France since his work does not only consist of theoretical knowledge about wine – probably the aspect that digitization has impacted the most- but also and mostly of human relationships that therefore remained away from the consequences of internet. It does not really matter then if the client is more informed about wine thanks to theoretical information he has access to on the internet, what matters is the *experience*, which is about the taste and the pleasantness of the restaurant, an aspect on which the sommeliers can obviously influence based upon the way they behave with the clients, the anecdotes they might tell, the theatricality they may display, the tradition they embody. All these elements are anchored in an environment, in a particular instant, closely related to the senses and consequently that market segment is very little subject to the changes that internet may have brought in other fields of the wine industry (speculation, sales...).

The sommelier is thus indissociable from the gastronomic restaurant, he has a role to play to make the experience memorable, an idea that corroborates the concept of experience economy enhanced by Pine and Gilmore (2011). As they are part of the whole dining experience, there is still a willingness to pay the price accordingly, and if there is a threat on the future of the profession (sommelier in gastronomic restaurants) it is less from the demand side than from the supply one. Therefore, the demand for experts (critics included) does not seem to be undermined by the rise of amateur bloggers. Indeed, the expertise of the sommelier provides him legitimacy in the eyes of the client who asks him for guidance in order to enjoy the best experience possible. Therefore, the sommelier's great importance also lies in his capability to reduce the information asymmetry as well as the risk that may be perceived by the client.

Interestingly, many elements that have not been mentioned in the literature review have been brought up in the interviews, notably the qualities of a good sommelier. It appeared that the skills of the sommelier largely exceed the mere wine knowledge. Indeed, many other elements such as cultural knowledge, knowledge of the cooking, of the various drinks, as well as interpersonal skills are essential in the profession making it a global work. All these skills aim at enhancing the dining

experience and as such, the sommelier can be regarded as an experience enhancer, the person that lives up the restaurant and through his communication abilities, enjoys special relations with the client. Gaining the client's trust seems to be essential for the sommelier, a way to have free rein with the clients and the ability to surprise them with new wines. Indeed, this willingness to "open doors" was described as a goal for the sommelier who considers himself to be an "ambassador of the wine-makers", endowed with the responsibility for making the clients discover less famous brands and regions. Therefore, he can be regarded less as a trend follower than as a newness introducer.

The creation of such a list has indeed been a core aspect that emerged from all the interviews and an element that crystallized the questions related to the creative aspect of the sommelier's work. In fact, the topic of creativity has been raised in the literature review as something the chef has to look for so as to stand out in a context of competition and the question was to know whether creativity was as well important in the work of the sommelier. If this idea of a fierce competition in the restaurant industry has been confirmed by all the respondents, creativity for sommeliers is restricted to the creation of the wine list mostly. Still, the excellence of the wine list was pointed out as a strategy for differentiation between the restaurants. Such a wine list must be meticulously created in order to balanced different requirements: the occasion (business/family dinner etc...), the client's budget, the chef's cooking... and cover up all the range of the clients' profiles.

Another element to put into perspective with the literature review, as it overthrows the hypotheses, is the importance of New World wines. Indeed, in the context of globalization, one could have expected from the consumers to have a deeper interest in the wines from abroad. However, it turned out that both the foreign tourists and the French people mostly ask for French wines and the sommeliers themselves want to honour French wines in priority and are interested in exploring the richness of the French terroirs first.

Finally, the interviews brought up the topic of evolutions in the profession of the sommelier as well as in the consumer's habits. It has been interesting to see how wine moved from a product of daily consumption to a luxury product, consumed for events and special occasions, an idea that would explain as well, the rise of interest in wine these past few years.

It is important to take into account the limitation of this research since it bases its conclusion on the responses of ten interviewees from three cities only, and cannot be entirely representative of *the* French sommelier, as the role may differ regarding the regions. Further research may be interesting to lead about the differences between the French and a non-French sommelier, also in the differences of the clients' tastes and challenges the restaurants may face. Indeed, while France is considered to be the country of gastronomy, it would be interested to research on other countries that are not labelled as such. In fact, wine being part of the French culture, other countries may have

another approach, other tastes, that may be interesting to research on as well. Finally, further research would be needed in order to shed light on the wine blogs and social media, such as the profile of both the bloggers and the readers and therefore draw a conclusion on which fields of the wine world, the social media really have an impact.

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## Questionnaire

### 1. Introduction

- **Pourriez-vous me parler de votre parcours ? D'où provient votre passion pour le vin ?**

**Quelle formation avez-vous suivie ?**

*Could you tell me about your story? Where does your interest in wine stem from? What training did you follow?*

- **Le sommelier aujourd'hui est-il le même qu'il y a quelques années ?**

*Does the sommelier today have the same role as several years ago?*

- **Quelles sont, selon vous, les qualités d'un excellent sommelier ?**

*According to you, what is today, an excellent sommelier?*

- **Cela fait plusieurs années que vous exercez ce métier, avez-vous une évolution/changement dans ce que les gens préfèrent consommer ?**

*You have been working in the field of wine for several years, have you seen a change in the consumers' preferences?*

### 2. La formation du sommelier

- **La formation du sommelier diffère de celle d'autrefois ? (Met-on l'accent sur certains aspects aujourd'hui qui n'existaient pas il y a quelques années et vice versa ?)**

*Has the training of the sommelier changed over the years? (Are there some aspects emphasized today that were not before and vice versa?)*

### 3. Dualité expert-amateur

- **Le vin est-il un produit qui s'est démocratisé ? (si oui, comment, pourquoi ?)**

*Do you think the wine product has become more popularized?*

- **Pensez-vous que les gens sont aujourd'hui plus informés sur le sujet ?**

*Do you think people today are more informed about wine than they were before?*

- **Comment définiriez-vous le concept d'expert dans le monde du vin ?**

*How would you define the concept of wine expert?*

- **Internet a-t-il modifié le rôle du sommelier ? Quel usage en faites-vous d'internet dans votre métier?**

*Has internet impacted the role of the sommelier? What are you using it for in your job?*

- **Avec les réseaux sociaux, beaucoup d'internautes amateurs de vin ont tendance à s'exprimer. Ont-ils beaucoup d'influence sur les consommateurs ? Sur les modes ? Les experts prennent-ils en compte leurs critiques/avis ?**

*With the development of internet, many wine amateurs tend to write critics/express their opinion. Do they have a strong influence on the consumers' choice? On the trends? Do wine experts take their opinions in consideration?*

#### **4. L'aspect compétitif du milieu de la restauration**

- **Pensez-vous que la compétition s'est accrue ces dernières années dans le milieu de la restauration ?**

*What about the competition between restaurants? Has it increased over the years?*

- **De quelle manière les chefs y font-ils face ?**

*How do the chefs cope with it?*

- **La présence d'un sommelier dans un restaurant permet-elle de « sortir du lot » ?**

*Does the presence of a sommelier within a restaurant enables it to stand out?*

#### **5. Innovation, créativité**

- **Comment travaillez-vous avec le chef ?**

*How are you working with the chef?*

- **La part d'innovation, de créativité est-elle importante dans votre métier ?**

*Are the concepts of innovation and creativity important in your job?*

- **Le client va-t-il davantage rechercher la tradition ou la surprise ?**

*Is the client more eager of tradition or surprise?*

- **Y a t-il certains vins à avoir absolument en cave ?**

*Are there must-have wines to necessarily have in the cellar?*

- **Quelles sont les qualités qu'un chef recherche lorsqu'il choisit le sommelier ?**

*What are the qualities that a chef look for when he/she hires a sommelier?*

- **Comment choisissez-vous vos vins ?**

*How do you choose your wines?*

- **A qui/à quoi vous référez-vous pour faire ces choix ?**

*To whom do you rely on when you make your choices?*

- **La proportion de vins étrangers a-t-elle augmenté par rapport à autrefois ? Les clients en demandent-ils ?**

*What about wines from abroad? Has their proportion increased in the restaurants cellar? Do the clients ask for them?*

- **Quelles sont les étapes que vous suivez lorsque vous conseillez un vin ?**

*What are the different steps to advise a wine ?*

## 6. Les codes

- **A votre avis, quelle image le sommelier suscite-t-il dans l'imaginaire collectif ? Pourquoi ?**

*According to you, how is the personality of the sommelier perceived by people? What images do people have in mind when hearing this name? Why?*

- **Pensez-vous que la présence d'un sommelier dans un restaurant agit comme signal de qualité ? Pourquoi ?**

*Do you think that a sommelier acts as a quality signal for a restaurant? Why?*

- **Pensez-vous que les gens sont plus sensibles qu'autrefois à la présence d'un sommelier lorsqu'ils vont au restaurant ?**

*Do you think people care more about the presence of a sommelier when going to the restaurant, than they did before?*

- **Aujourd'hui, il semblerait que les gens sont avides d'expériences (un aspect aussi renforcé par Instagram et les réseaux sociaux). Pensez-vous dans cette optique, que la personnalité du sommelier a pris de l'importance aujourd'hui ?**

*People today seem to care a lot about "experiencing" things (something strengthened by Instagram and the social media). Regarding this, do you think the sommelier grew in importance?*

## Appendice A

Name	Length of the interview	Occupation	Gender	Training/Diploma	Distinctions
Baptiste Cavagna (I1)	1'16''	Chef sommelier at <i>Le Grand Restaurant</i> (Paris)	Male		Meilleur sommelier de l'année 2016
Jean-Luc Jamrozik (I2)	2'27''	Chef Sommelier at <i>Hôtel Lancaster</i> and <i>Hôtel Baltimore</i> (Paris)	Male		-Maître sommelier -Président de l'association des Sommeliers de Paris
Catherine Agelasto (I3)	2'2''	Independant Sommelière à <i>Agelasto Degustations</i> (Paris)	Female		-Maître Sommelière -2 <sup>nd</sup> Prize Master of Port contest
Alexandre Morin (I5)	51''	Independant sommelier (Distribution and consulting) at <i>Le Vin l'Emportera</i> and former chef sommelier (Bordeaux)	Male	Faculté d'œnologie de Bordeaux Segalen - Diplôme Universitaire d'aptitude à la dégustation, œnologie.	
Leagh Barkley (I4)	48''	Chef sommelier at <i>Le Chapon Fin</i> (Bordeaux)	Male	Diplômé de la International Sommelier Guild	-Silver Medal Diploma A.S.I. (Association de la Sommellerie Internationale) -1er Prix au Concours de Sommellerie Michel Rolland
Frank Chausse (I6)	42'28'''	œnologist and head of the sommelier programme at CAFA school (Bordeaux)	Male	Diplôme National d'œnologue – Faculté Bordeaux	
Stéphane Boutiton (I7)	35'18'''	Sommellerie teacher at CAFA school (Bordeaux)	Male	Diplôme Universitaire d'Aptitude à la Dégustation	
Mickaël (I8)	14'46'''	Student at CAFA school (Bordeaux)	Male	BTS Tourisme MC sommellerie	

Denis Verneau (I9)	58''	Chef sommelier at <i>La Mère Brazier</i> (Lyon)	Male		-Meilleur Ouvrier de France Sommelier 2015 -Master of Port 2015 -Meilleur sommelier de l'année 2015
Alain Rosier (I10)	1'16''	Lecturer and former sommellerie teacher (Lyon)	Male	Cap Restaurant – CAP Cuisine - Brevet de Technicien Hôtelier	-Meilleur sommelier de France 1976 -Meilleur sommelier du Monde 1986 (bronze)

## Appendice B

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
The sommelier as an experience enhancer	The qualities of the good sommelier today	The qualities apart from his/her relationship with the client
		The qualities related to the relationship with the client
	Competition and creativity	The perception of the sommelier in society
		How to stand out
	The creation of the wine list	Getting to know the different wines
		The selection of the wines
		The renewal of the wine list
		The proportion of wines from abroad
	Diner/wine as an experience	The idea of pleasure
		The setting
The evolutions in the world of wine	Evolution of the sommelier	In the training
		In the outcomes
		In the way to behave with the client
	Evolution from the client's side	In the tastes
		In the habits/traditions
		In the perception of the image of the sommelier
	A relative democratization of wine	Easiest access to information/tastings
		The reasons of this growing interest
		Wine as a luxury product
	Wine and the sharing aspect	
Internet and the (social) media	The use of the social media and applications	Social media and censorship
		The relative use of social media for the sommeliers
		Importance and issues of reviews/Tripadvisor and Vivino
	Critics and blogs	The importance of the experts
Change for the sales but less in the restauration system		