

Preparation pays off for master sommelier

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By Joleen Oshiro



Patrick Okubo is nothing if not driven. In working toward becoming Hawaii's third master sommelier, the former Formaggio managing partner studied for a year to pass the examination, reviewing thousand of flash cards and covering the walls of his home with wine information. He even spent \$5,000 to taste wines.

"For one grape there are hundreds of different possibilities in vintages and producers, so you gotta keep tasting different things," he says. "I held blind tastings with different people. When I was in San Francisco I'd (meet with) my network there. I have a group here that meets weekly. You have to meet with different people or you can't learn different techniques."

Okubo, 29, earned his master sommelier diploma, the highest certification in wine and beverage service, on July 28 in Las Vegas. He joins the ranks of just 186 master sommeliers worldwide, including Hawaii's Roberto Viernes and Chuck Furuya.

There are four levels of exams that lead to the diploma, implemented by the Court of Master Sommeliers, a group dedicated to educating wine professionals. The final exam is offered by invitation only. Candidates must prove proficient in theory, blind tasting and wine service and are allowed to pass each category individually. Okubo passed the blind tasting last year.

To give himself enough time to prep for the rest of the exam, he left Formaggio in February and took a part-time job serving wine at Mariposa at Neiman Marcus.

"I'd walk around Diamond Head twice a day with the flash cards in my hand. Walking kept the adrenaline going and eliminated distractions," he says of the three-hour treks. On days off he walked for eight hours.

Okubo had group study weekly and had his father text him questions daily. He drew 150 fill-in-the-blank maps of wine regions and made bedroom wallpaper out of posters of Burgundy's top vineyards so he could study as soon as he awoke. He posted cocktail recipes all over the bathroom.

"My entire house was full of information," he says.

raised in Kaimuki, Okubo is a University of Hawaii graduate with a degree in travel industry management. He began learning about wine while working at the Manele Bay resort on Lanai

in 2004.

Last week he started work as a fine wine educator for Young's Market Co., a national wine and spirits distributor. He's the company's first master sommelier.

Okubo also hosts a radio podcast show, "A Perfect Sip," with Elton Nichols of the Pacific Club. Okubo runs his own wine education and sommelier service, The Wine GI, as well.

Okubo calls wine his passion and says it has enabled him to become best at something for the first time in his life.

"I'm a jack-of-all-trades. I'm an above-average restaurant manager. I'm an average clarinet player. I'm an Army National Guardsman. But I've never been regarded best at anything. Being a master sommelier is my opportunity," he says.

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