

Heads up! She's the first female cicerone

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By Barbara Wild



What a sommelier does for wine — helping guests pair the flavors of a meal with the ideal vintage — certified cicerone Annette May of Allen Park does for beer.

May, who works as the beer department manager of Merchant's Fine Wine in Dearborn, is the first woman to receive the certification developed by beer expert Ray Daniels, director of the Cicerone Certification Program.

The program's goal is to identify people with great expertise who can guide consumers to enjoyable and high-quality experiences with great beer.

The term "cicerone" refers to a docent or guide and the approachable Allen Park Aussie with an encyclopedic knowledge of craft brewing is happy to show beer drinkers the way to what she calls "the good life."

"I'm basically teaching people about understanding beer and what it is," May said. "It's not just a freezing cold yellow fizzy drink out of a bottle that you drink at sports events or out in the garage with your buddies.

"Beer is part of everyday living. It's part of a well-balanced diet. It's part of gastronomic delight."

Before the three-tiered program of certified beer server, certified cicerone and master cicerone was developed, everyone who could tell a Blatz from a bitter ale — or even a wine expert with a working knowledge of craft brew — could call themselves experts.

Now there's a standard.

May credits Daniels for creating the much-needed certification process.

"I feel lucky that people are taking notice because I'm the first woman, but it's not about me being the first woman, it's about the program," May said.

Each level of expertise spotlights five areas of concentration that increase in complexity, but at the heart of each is getting beer to the consumer in the best possible condition.

At the server level, an online program, applicants are tested on proper serving techniques; knowledge of beer styles, flavor and evaluation, ingredients and brewing processes; and pairing beer with food — all within a multiple-choice format.

"Too often, great beer is harmed by improper serving practices," May said.

Serving beer in a frosty mug, for example, is a faux pas.

In addition to making a beer too cold, May said, it can make it go flat.

"Ice is an uneven surface, so the ice in the inside of the glass actually creates nucleation sites for carbon dioxide to come out of solution in the beer," she said.

A glass with soap residue has a similar negative impact.

"You can get a beautiful beer and put it in a glass and it will go totally flat and look terrible and taste terrible if the glass isn't cleaned," May said.

At the certified cicerone level, the exam requires industry experience and a recommendation from a brewer or retailer, plus 100 shortanswer questions, three essays, a 12-beer tasting component and a hands-on demonstration.

The third level, master cicerone, requires two years experience, three recommendations and demonstrated mastery at all levels.

While May found the craft brew industry unexpectedly, having been trained as a nurse, her stellar resume includes bartending, bar management, beer sales and distribution with a multistate territory, and her current job with Merchants, which boasts more than 1,000 beers from 271 breweries.

She's also married to Mike Bardallis, beer expert and award-winning homebrewer, who also achieved certified cicerone status.

Despite May's experience, however, she knew passing Daniel's tests would be no piece of cake. The month before the exam, May budgeted an hour each night to go over the extensive syllabus.

"I wanted to do well," she said. She did.

The written portion took 2 1/2 hours to complete and included questions about everything from food pairings, causes of light-struck or "skunky" beer, to Bavarian beer styles.

The next few hours of the proctored test required her to identify beer styles, serving techniques and problems in chemically altered samples.

The final step had her disassembling and reassembling part of a draft system to check that the beer line was properly cleaned and fully functional.

While May has always been comfortable with her ability to pair foods and styles, her extensive preparation for the test had an unintended impact.

"I thought I knew a lot about beer and I did, and I sat the exam and learned more through the study process and I found that having the qualification gave me more confidence," she said.

For May's customers, planning a meal with a certified cicerone's help is like taking a really fun quiz, only you get every question right.

Ask "what should I buy" when surrounded by the store's extraordinary collection of world-class beers and May applies the same criteria she uses to select the ones she drinks or uses to cook.

What do you like?

When are you going to have it?

Is this a beer that you're going to have with food?

Is this a beer you're sharing?

Is it something you want to have a couple of when you get home from a hard day's work or is it something you want to sip slowly in front of the fire after dinner?

As May's reputation grows, so do the number of requests for advice she gets and opportunities to guide customers to "the good life."

For a barbecued burger, it's "a malty, sort of amberish lager beer," while a wine drinker with a more sophisticated palate will be guided to "something richer and more sophisticated, maybe something that had some oak aging," she said.

Whatever the choice, the cicerone's advice is simple: "Embrace beer. Embrace food. Don't be afraid. And enjoy. Beer is very much still an affordable luxury in these tight times."