

Sommelier interview questions

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What to expect

Sommelier interviews test wine knowledge, service judgement and commercial sense together, not wine knowledge alone. Expect a mix of scenario-based questions, questions about handling guests and staff, and questions about the business side of running a beverage list.

- **Technical/product knowledge:** Questions on wine regions, varietals, pairing logic and how you'd apply that knowledge to a specific menu or list.
- **Scenario/judgement:** Situational questions about handling a difficult guest, a supplier issue or a mistake during service, testing how you think under pressure.
- **Behavioural:** Past-experience questions about training staff, managing a cellar or handling a demanding guest, usually answered with a specific example.
- **Client-facing:** Questions about how you read a guest's budget and knowledge level and adjust your recommendations accordingly.
- **Business acumen:** Questions on margin, purchasing decisions, stock control and balancing profitability against guest value.

Interviews usually open with background and certifications, move into a practical or scenario component (sometimes a short pairing or tasting exercise), then behavioural questions about staff and guest handling, and close with questions on cellar management and commercial targets.

1. Walk me through how you'd build a by-the-glass wine list for a new seasonal menu.

Why they ask

Tests pairing logic, supplier knowledge and margin awareness together, which is the core of the role.

How to structure your answer

Answer as a step-by-step walkthrough: start with the menu and guest profile, then sourcing and tasting, then pricing and margin, then staff briefing.

Example answer

"I'd start by sitting down with the kitchen to understand the new dishes and their dominant flavours, acid and fat content. From there I'd shortlist wines from existing supplier relationships and taste them against the actual dishes rather than relying on theory alone. I'd choose a spread across price points so there's an entry option and something more considered, then check each wine's margin against our target before finalising the list. Once it's set, I'd run a short tasting with the floor team so they can speak to the pairings confidently rather than just reading off the list."

2. Tell me about a time you had to train staff who had little wine knowledge.

Why they ask

Front-of-house training is a stated part of the role and shows whether you can transfer expertise, not just hold it.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"At a previous venue, most of the floor staff could describe a wine as 'dry' or 'sweet' but not much beyond that, which meant guests often got vague answers. I put together short, informal tastings before service twice a week, focusing on two or three wines at a time and linking each to a dish on the menu."

menu rather than teaching regions in the abstract. Staff started using the specific language in service within a couple of weeks, and I noticed guests asking more follow-up questions, which usually meant they trusted the recommendation more."

3. A guest sends back a bottle claiming it's faulty, but you taste it and it's fine. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

Tests judgement under pressure and the balance between technical correctness and guest relations.

How to structure your answer

Judgement-under-pressure structure: acknowledge the guest, assess without being defensive, decide, explain the reasoning.

Example answer

"I'd taste it myself at the table rather than arguing from a distance, and explain what I'm tasting for so the guest can see I'm taking it seriously. If the wine is sound, I'll usually still offer an alternative by the glass or a different bottle rather than insisting they're wrong, because the relationship matters more than being right about one bottle. I'd also note it so the manager and I are aligned if it comes up again with that guest."

4. How would you handle a situation where a supplier's delivery is delayed and you're low on a key wine for a big event?

Why they ask

Cellar management and purchasing are named responsibilities, and this checks how you problem-solve a real supply gap.

How to structure your answer

Scenario response: assess the gap, identify options, communicate the change, follow up.

Example answer

"First I'd check exactly how much stock is left and how far it stretches across the event. If it's not enough, I'd look at close substitutes already in the cellar rather than panic-buying something unfamiliar, and brief the floor team on the swap so they can explain it to guests confidently. I'd also flag the delay with the supplier and adjust future order timing so it doesn't happen again before the next big booking."

5. What's your approach to advising a guest who knows little about wine but has a specific budget?

Why they ask

Client-facing advisory work is central to the role and this tests how you read and respect a guest's comfort level.

How to structure your answer

Direct explanation of approach, ideally illustrated with a short example.

Example answer

"I ask a couple of simple questions rather than technical ones, like whether they usually prefer something lighter or bolder, or what they're eating. I keep the language plain and offer two options within their budget rather than a long list, because too many choices usually makes people more anxious, not less. The goal is that they leave feeling looked after, not tested on their wine knowledge."

6. How do you balance pushing higher-margin wines against giving guests the best value pairing?

Why they ask

Business acumen and margin management are explicit parts of the role, and this checks whether commercial pressure would compromise guest trust.

How to structure your answer

Direct explanation with a worked example of the trade-off.

Example answer

"I don't see it as a straight trade-off. If I recommend something purely for margin and it doesn't work with the food, the guest notices eventually and it costs more in trust than the extra margin is worth. I look for wines that are both a genuine fit for the dish and reasonably placed on margin, and I'll be upfront if a guest asks for my honest opinion rather than steering them toward the most expensive bottle by default."