

Vienna, 17 November 2025

**Report of the Expert Commission on Allegations Against the Sommelier Union Austria
Regarding the Organisation of the “Best Sommelier of Austria 2023” Competition:**

Commission Members (in alphabetical order):

Laurence Franzen, Luxembourg, Dipl. Sommelier, various roles in national and international associations, educator (Hotel and Tourism School EHTL Diekirch), Maître d’Hôtel

Wolfgang Kiechl, Mag. Dr., lawyer in Vienna, author, former wine journalist for over 10 years, wine blogger (Chair)

Niels Toase, Luxembourg, Dipl. Sommelier, various roles in national and international associations, educator (Hotel and Tourism School EHTL Diekirch), Maître d’Hôtel

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1. Brief Summary of the Facts:

On October 23, 2023, the competition "Best Sommelier Austria 2023" took place. Max Steiner won, ahead of Stefan Klettner and Markus Winkler. Some time after this competition, in 2024, allegations were made by the former two-time winner of this competition, Suvad Zlatic, claiming that the winner, Max Steiner, had an unfair knowledge advantage (through his coach, Carol Rohrmoser-Stein). These allegations were subsequently amplified and culminated in various media reports. Ultimately, on August 25, 2025, Mr. Suvad Zlatic, through his lawyer, filed a criminal complaint with the Innsbruck Public Prosecutor’s Office on suspicion of “competition manipulation.

2. No criminal offence committed

The complaint was dismissed by the Innsbruck Public Prosecutor's Office a few days after its submission, and Mr. Suvad Zlatic's lawyer was informed that no investigation would be initiated (10 ST 142/252), for the following reason:

"The initiation of criminal proceedings against Carole ROHRMOSER-STEIN and others based on the criminal complaint submitted by Suvad ZLATIC on August 26, 2025 ('due to competition manipulation') is refrained from due to lack of initial suspicion of an offense to be prosecuted ex officio pursuant to § 197a para. 1 1. F StPO."

Additional Note:

From the presentation of facts, there is no initial suspicion of a criminal act; there is neither financial harm caused by deception nor any legal act related to the alleged "competition manipulation." Furthermore, the insinuations made do not establish any initial suspicion of a criminal offense.

3. Structure of the Association:

The Sommelier Union Austria is a non-profit association. It acts as the umbrella organization for Austrian Sommelier Associations (note: of the federal states), particularly to represent their interests externally.

The purpose of the association is the promotion of the sommelier profession, especially by providing members with information in all relevant areas. It aims to raise public awareness of sophisticated table culture and to promote beverage culture in the gastronomy and hospitality sectors.

For decades, under the same framework as in 2023, the association has been organizing the event "Best Sommelier Austria."

The president of the association is Ms. Annemarie Foidl. Carole Rohrmoser-Stein has been active in various roles within the association for many years. Since summer 2024, Ms. Carole Rohrmoser-Stein has been the Technical Director of the association. Max Steiner has been a member of the association since June 2024 and serves as Deputy Secretary.

4. General Procedure of the “Best Sommelier Austria” Competitions:

The individuals involved in organizing this competition have always formed a small, voluntary group. This is due to the limited number of qualified and committed persons willing to dedicate part of their free time without remuneration.

It is noteworthy that, in some cases, there was an overlap of individuals who trained the competitors, prepared the competition tasks, and also served on the jury. Until the complaints now at issue (2024 ff.), this overlap, as far as can be ascertained, was not challenged.

The Sommelier Union Austria expressly emphasizes that all previous competitions, including the year 2023, were conducted under the same organizational framework. The tasks and evaluations were designed to ensure fair comparability of results.

Nonetheless, this practice was not ideal, as the overlap of roles created the appearance of potential bias, relying on the integrity of the individuals performing multiple functions. For future events, the Sommelier Union Austria has therefore established new, clear rules of conduct to prevent such overlaps. Going forward, a strict separation will be maintained between trainers, jury members, and persons responsible for preparing the competition tasks.

If historical events are to be viewed critically due to this management structure in light of limited verifiability of objectivity, such scrutiny must apply to all events, and cannot be confined solely to the year 2023.

5. Coaching Activities of Carole Rohrmoser-Stein:

Ms. Carole Rohrmoser-Stein is recognized as a particularly experienced and sought-after trainer. In 2023, she voluntarily coached, according to her own statements, not only Max Steiner but also the finalist Markus Winkler. She also offered her coaching services to the finalist Stefan Klettner, who, however, did not make use of them. Since he lived and worked abroad, he trained with other individuals.

In the past, Ms. Rohrmoser-Stein also trained Mr. Suvad Zlatic intensively and successfully for over ten years. Mr. Zlatic was a dominant figure in the domestic sommelier scene for an extended period and was, among other achievements, a two-time winner of this competition. To the knowledge of the Commission, Mr. Zlatic did not raise any complaints or suggestions regarding the conduct of the competition or the composition of the committees prior to 2023.

6. Best Sommelier Austria 2023:

The competition took place on October 22 and 23, 2023.

Ms. Rohrmoser-Stein stated, when questioned, that she did not provide Mr. Max Steiner with any competitive advantage.

The training content she provided was not confidential. On the contrary, it was agreed that this information could and should be shared with Suvad Zlatic, who also acted as a mentor/trainer to Max Steiner. This is exactly what occurred. During these training sessions, and in light of her expertise and experience with previous competitions, attention was paid to past practice scenarios, the composition of the jury (this time including two Greek sommeliers), and the main sponsors. Within such training, all possible scenarios are rehearsed, and it is precisely the purpose of this approach that overlaps with actual competition content may occur.

The Commission members reviewed the video of the final, which is also publicly available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAdII TwHWWI>. (Note: The video has always been available online; a wrong link previously caused a misunderstanding.)

The video demonstrates that all three finalists were exceptionally well-prepared.

The opening scenario, involving a main sponsor (a beer brand), did not surprise any of the participants, and all three delivered a similar performance. This was facilitated by the fact that the main sponsor produces only a limited range of products. The flavor profiles were already apparent from the product names (hoppy = more bitter, malty = sweeter).

In the equally predictable "Champagne segment," all three participants demonstrated excellent preparation. For example, the runner-up, Stefan Klettner, immediately knew that the current prestige cuvée of a main sponsor consisted of 58% Chardonnay and 42% Pinot Noir. All participants were able to answer the sometimes challenging detailed questions regarding this Champagne brand without gaps. This indicates that all three finalists had been specifically trained and prepared for this segment, as such detailed knowledge could not otherwise have been demonstrated.

Regarding the blind tasting of four wines, the top two participants showed remarkable accuracy. Mr. Klettner correctly identified all four wines (grape variety and origin), while Mr. Steiner correctly identified three wines.

The top two participants anticipated (based on two jury members) that one of the wines might be Greek and, as a result of intensive training in such scenarios, correctly identified the Cypriot dessert wine.

No knowledge advantage for Mr. Steiner can be inferred from the course of the final competition.

Ms. Carol Rohrmoser-Stein served as a jury member at short notice due to Mr. Suvad Zlatic's absence from the event (unexpected family bereavement), which he did not contest. Both had previously traveled together from Tyrol to Burgenland. In this capacity, Ms. Rohrmoser-Stein evaluated the written questionnaires of the participants (anonymous, numbered), in which Mr. Steiner was not among the top performers in this segment prior to the final.

The evaluation by the jury in the final was based not only on the participants' knowledge but also, and in particular, on their presentation, eloquence, and "selling" skills. In the Commission's view, the jury's assessment is beyond reproach. There is no indication of preferential treatment of any participant.

7. Regarding Mr. Zlatic's Specific Allegations Concerning an Alleged Knowledge Advantage of Max Steiner:

Two fact patterns are known:

- 7.1.** Max Steiner forwarded content ("inputs") from his training with Carol Rohrmoser-Stein, along with related questions, via WhatsApp to Mr. Zlatic, whom he regarded as a second trainer. These messages were later forwarded by Mr. Zlatic, with a delay, to the Public Prosecutor's Office and to the media, from which he drew the conclusion that the candidate had a knowledge advantage.

Carol Rohrmoser-Stein stated that these were standard learning contents (e.g., current products of the main sponsor) and not a "secret." Max Steiner concurs with this assessment in a written statement.

The allegations concern the beers of one sponsor, the Champagne Cuvée No. 26 of a Champagne house (another sponsor), and recommended tasting lists of various wines. All finalists had anticipated the topics of beer and Champagne and were appropriately prepared. No competitive advantage for Mr. Steiner is discernible, as all finalists demonstrated practically the same knowledge.

Regarding the blind tasting of four wines, the unifying factor “warm climate” was recognizable to sommeliers with years of training. A significant portion of European wines is “Mediterranean,” and the reasoning of the two top finalists to this common denominator is therefore logical. In fact, the runner-up correctly identified one more wine (CS Cuvée – Bolgheri), whereas the winner believed one of the wines to be from the Languedoc with different grape varieties.

- 7.2.** In early October 2025, Mr. Zlatic forwarded additional WhatsApp messages and an audio recording to the board of the Sommelier Union Austria via email. These consisted of knowledge questions that Max Steiner had sent to him, as well as a forwarded voice message from Carol Rohrmoser-Stein.

Regarding certain points (e.g., “Decanter Man of the Year”), it should be noted that such questions have appeared in many past competitions and it is standard for a well-prepared candidate to memorize these “men of the year.” In particular, it can be assumed that top sommeliers regularly read all relevant magazines, such as Decanter, Wine Advocate, Vinum, and others.

Other questions (e.g., Eisenberg DAC – grape varieties) are standard learning content and frequently appear in competitions.

Carol Rohrmoser-Stein states that she repeatedly asks candidates during training to review current developments prior to the competition (e.g., Eisenberg as a new DAC) as well as recurring content (e.g., Decanter Man of the Year).

The audio message relates to a past competition in which “Stefan” (presumably Mr. Klettner) participated, and it was recommended that the video be reviewed for training purposes.

Even if Mr. Zlatic’s conclusions were correct, the points cited constitute an insignificantly small portion of the overall knowledge questions.

- 7.3.** Steiner and Mr. Zlatic. There is no documented forwarding of messages from Ms. Carol Rohrmoser-Stein, except for the cited audio message.

For the sake of completeness, the Commission notes that it is aware that any potential disclosure of confidential competition tasks could theoretically have occurred in various

ways (e.g., by telephone or in person). However, the specific results of the written answers and the course of the competition (as shown in the video) provide no evidence of this; on the contrary, they indicate a fair and proper conduct of the competition.

8. Summary

Carole Rohrmoser-Stein trained Max Steiner on content that was helpful and relevant for the competition. However, this is precisely the purpose of such training, which has been undertaken by many successful candidates over the past decades.

The conclusions drawn by Mr. Zlatic from the WhatsApp messages are neither sufficient nor conclusive, although they may be possible in certain respects. This is contradicted by the course of the competition. The statements of Carol Rohrmoser-Stein and Max Steiner also speak against such conclusions.

In the Commission's view, there is no evidence of an unfair knowledge advantage for Max Steiner in the 2023 competition.

9. Outlook for the Future:

By separating tasks and clarifying the identities of involved persons, any appearance of bias can be avoided in the future.

For future events, it may also be advisable to document training content provided by trainers who are members of the Sommelier Union Austria or of sommelier associations of the federal states, and to make this content appropriately available to all candidates.

From the Commission's perspective, transparency regarding the evaluation at the conclusion of a competition is also recommended, as it may help build trust.

(Signature, see German version)