

Fine wine sales service passes the test

By Robin Lynam



VINISTA

Wine Tasting Note

Appearance:

Nose:

Palate:

A black fountain pen with a silver nib, resting on the bottom right corner of the wine tasting note form.



THE PERFORMERS

THE BUSINESS of selling fine wine in Hong Kong has been transformed in recent years. The market has achieved a level of sophistication unknown in Asia outside Japan. The reason? Hong Kong wine expert and educator Simon Tam, Director of International Wine Centre, has no doubts.

“Watson’s Wine Cellar has single handedly created whole wine categories in Hong Kong, because of the way the business grew and the number of shops opening,” he says emphatically.

“There has never been more champagne sold in Hong Kong. There has never been more French wine. There was never decent quality German wine in the quantity and variety now available before Watson’s came. I think in the last five years Watson’s has really done Hong Kong a great big fat favour.”

Many things have changed in the Hong Kong wine trade since 1998 when Watson’s Wine Cellar opened its first outlet, but perhaps the single most notable difference is that the stores, and their competitors, now cater to much more discerning customers.

There is now a critical mass of well informed wine enthusiasts who buy on a basis of real product knowledge

– rather than purely on price or recognition of a famous label, as was so often the case in the past. Others who may not know as much are nevertheless keen to learn – especially now the health benefits of drinking wine, particularly red, are well known – and are asking more searching questions of the staff who serve them.

That's all good news according to James Hepple, Watson's Wine Cellar's Operations & Marketing Controller, who says that thanks to high-level staff training programmes the company's front-line personnel are more than ready with their answers.

"Since early 2004 we have been putting the majority of our staff through Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET) courses," explains Mr Hepple. "Before that we definitely did wine training, but it was more ad hoc."

The initiative coincided with the repositioning of Watson's Wine Cellar as a fine wines retailer, clearly differentiated within the group from PARKnSHOP as offering a premium, rather than a primarily cost competitive, product. Previously, there had been an overlap in the market positioning of the stores.

"It works really well," says Mr Hepple. "If you have staff who are knowledgeable about wine it positively affects your sales, but it benefits the customer as well because they get better service and better guidance on the wine they choose. It also aids with staff development, so everyone wins."

In his opinion a higher level of wine knowledge is essential for staff who interact with cus-

tomers on a regular basis. "They need to know at least as much as, if not more than, our most sophisticated customers, otherwise we lose credibility," he says.

British based WSET is an institution originally established to raise professional standards in the wine industry. Its courses are taught internationally by Approved Programme Providers of whom nine, including Mr Tam's International Wine Centre, offer the service in Hong Kong. Examinations are marked in London.

WSET is not the only educational and examining body offering wine education to the trade, and certainly not the cheapest, but is generally regarded as the best.

Mr Hepple has no doubt at all on that score. "Other options were considered, weighed and found wanting," he says. "The management team here has worked overseas and is in touch

FINE WINE AND ASIAN FOOD

THE MAJOR barrier to pairing western wine with Asian food is not, as tends to be thought, the powerful spiciness of some regional cuisines, but the fact that Asian meals tend to consist of multiple, shared dishes served more or less simultaneously. However, the problem of finding a suitable match is not insoluble with a sufficiently versatile wine.

White wines which complement Asian cuisines include Gewurztraminer, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier, go particularly well with the delicate flavours of Cantonese food. The spiciness of Gewurztraminer makes it a good partner for Thai or Sichuan dishes. Champagne is reckoned by many food and wine connoisseurs to be a perfect match for sushi and sashimi.

If a dish is delicately flavoured – abalone being a good example – it is important to avoid over chilling the wine, which tends to diminish appreciation of subtle taste sensations, and in the case of good whites also conceal their finer points. If, on the other hand, a dish is fiercely spicy with a lot of chilli, a simple well-chilled white can be the best option. There is no point in wasting a subtle wine on a strongly assertive dish or vice versa.

If choosing a red wine, it is best to avoid those with strong tannins which can be made unpleasantly bitter by soy sauce and salty flavours. New world Pinot Noirs are often a good match for a variety of different dishes, as are French wines from the Côtes du Rhône. Pinot Noir is a particularly good match for duck, while red Bordeaux or Barolo can go well with beef dishes.

If your taste is for heavier red wines it is important to make sure that the dishes on the table have a similar weight to them. It might be sensible to save your best Bordeaux and Burgundy for an occasion when you are eating western cuisine.





The Wine and Spirit Education Trust courses, generally regarded as the best, are available in Hong Kong.

internationally with the wine industry. It was unanimously decided that this was the most internationally recognised, reputable and stable wine course. It's more expensive and requires more organisation but that investment is worth it."

WSET offers foundation, intermediate and advanced wine courses with the option to proceed to a diploma. A new member of staff can generally expect to begin an intermediate course within three to six months of joining the company.

"We feel that by that stage that new joiner will have learned a lot on the job from the senior staff in the store. They are always tasting wines and are invited to join customer tastings for their own knowledge and experience. For that reason we feel that the intermediate level is a good place to start," Mr Hepple explains.

The staff's very high pass rate at that level would appear to justify his view. In 2007 all of the 18 students taking the course achieved passes – even though all were Cantonese speakers and the course was taught in English. There are, as yet, no WSET course materials offered in Chinese.

The tuition and study involved are intensive. The interme-

mediate course takes about three weeks, with a two week break for further study and revision before the exam.

The advanced course takes five weeks, with another fortnight's grace period before the moment of truth for the students, although the courses also include an element of continuous assessment. While the intermediate exam is largely theoretical the examining process for the advanced course also assesses the students' ability to taste and identify wines.

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"Since 2004 we have put 76 staff through the intermediate course, and 41 through the advanced course. That's a lot, given our total number of employees. Allowing for a certain turnover of personnel, almost all our staff have been through it," says Mr Hepple.

Not many of the chain's com-



ASIA'S BUDDING WINE HUB

THE DECISION to abolish all tax on wine is paving the way for Hong Kong to become the wine trading and distribution centre of Asia. The indications are that significant progress has already been made; between February 27 and mid-April, imports were up 78 per cent in terms of quantity and 215 per cent in value.

What's more, the 2008 Vinexpo Asia Pacific wine and spirits trade fair broke all records for exhibitor numbers and visitor attendance. And in August, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council is holding the inaugural Hong Kong International Wine Expo.

In April, Bonham's conducted the first wine auction held in Hong Kong for 10 years, realising HKD11.5 million (USD1.47 million) from 246 lots. On May 31, Acker Merrall & Condit held the biggest ever wine auction in Asia, with 922 lots realising HKD64 million.

petitors could make the same claim. In fact, Mr Hepple says he knows of no other wine retailer in the world with the same level of commitment to WSET training and qualifications.

Among the members of staff to have successfully completed both courses are Marketing Executive Janice Wong and Sales Assistant Cyrus Chung.

Both continued to work full time during their studies, and because the advanced course is considerably more demanding in terms of tasting challenges and in the amount of coursework to be assimilated, they had to surrender most of their free time for the better part of two months.

“There’s quite a big gap from intermediate to advanced,” recalls Ms Wong. “For the advanced course you really need time to study or you will fail.”

“It covers two papers, the theoretical and the practical. In each class there is the theory section from the tutor and then a lot of bottles of wine to taste. For example, we would talk about Italy for about an hour, and then have six or seven wines to taste – different kinds of Italian wines.

“The tasting part is hard because it depends on your palate rather than just your memory. We had to learn how to evaluate the wine and describe it well.”

Both Ms Wong and Mr Chung say they are now much more confident in their judgement. Mr Chung, who works in the Discovery Bay store, says the training has helped him considerably in advising customers. “I can give a professional opinion so I can help customers buy good quality wines and get value

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for money. But there is a lot of wine knowledge to absorb so I will continue to study hard,” he says.

For those who wonder whether staff training to this level can really make a difference to service standards, Mr Hepple has a very simple answer.

“We have an ongoing mystery shopper programme,” he explains. “Once a month, one of our mystery shoppers will go into each of our shops posing as a customer and asking some pretty dif-

ficult questions. Then we get a report sent back to us.

“In December 2007, Discovery Bay’s mystery shopper score was particularly good, and the comment about Cyrus was that he was very helpful, very knowledgeable, and answered all the questions correctly.”

Hong Kong’s ever-growing legion of wine lovers has long looked to Watson’s Wine Cellar for a good selection of high quality wines. And now, thanks to a firm commitment to the best possible staff training, they now have the certified assurance of service and guidance to match. 

HOW TO BECOME A WINE EXPERT

WHEN the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET) was established in 1969 its courses were formulated to train people working or intending to work in the wine industry. As interest in wine has increased worldwide, however, more and more people from outside the trade have opted to study the subject formally. Today, WSET runs wine education courses, spirits courses and wine tastings in 42 countries worldwide.

In England it has become difficult to get a job in the industry unless you have a WSET qualification. While Hong Kong is moving in that direction, many WSET students in the city simply enjoy the experience of learning more about the finer points of a hobby that is clearly close to their hearts.

For absolute beginners the best starting point is the WSET’s Level 1 Foundation Certificate in Wine, although many people with an established interest in the subject opt to start, like Watson’s Wine Cellar staff, with the Level 2 Intermediate Certificate.

Those who wish to pursue their interest further move on to the Level 3 Advanced Certificate and in some cases take the Level 4 Diploma and Level 5 Honours Diploma. Beginners get a basic education in wine regions, grape varieties, and the principles of wine tasting and service.

Those who proceed to the Level 4 Diploma, which the WSET describes as its “flagship qualification”, will study different regions and wine and spirit categories in great depth, as well as learning about the business aspects of the wine trade. They will tend to be occupying or seeking responsible positions in the wine industry.

