Fine wine sales service passes the test

By Robin Lynam

VINTA
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.
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.
If you have staff who are knowledgeable about wine it positively affects your sales but it benefits the customer as well.
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 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 difficult 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.

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