

# Regional wine lovers enjoy rare taste of the world



Debra Meiburg and Simon Tam, directors of the inaugural Cathay Pacific International Wine and Spirit Competition, taste one of the 1,300 wines from around the world that were entered for the competition.

For the first time in HK, Asian professionals assessed quality beverages from around the globe in competition. Reports by **Robin Lynam**

## HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL WINE & SPIRIT COMPETITION

Asia is now the fastest-growing wine market in the world and the thirst for wine knowledge, and for wine itself, seems unquenchable.

The inaugural Cathay Pacific International Wine and Spirit Competition (IWSC), held from October 31 to November 3 in conjunction with the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) Hong Kong International Wine and Spirits Fair, marked a historic attempt to assess wines from around the world from a fresh Asian perspective.

Assembled specially for the competition was a panel of wine professionals from the mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, Thailand and India, who judged about 1,300 wines.

Special attention was paid to wines made within the region.

"The Cathay Pacific Hong Kong IWSC was all about putting Asian tastes on the international wine map and highlighting 'Asia's choice, Asia's voice'," said Debra Meiburg, a master of wine and director of the competition.

Fellow director Simon Tam believed that a thorough evaluation of this kind was long overdue.

"The Asian consumer wine market is a valuable segment of the international wine industry, growing at more than seven times the rate of any other region. So it's about time the millions of Asian wine lovers had an authoritative guide to the best wines, suited to their own taste and consumption patterns," he said.

According to Tam, 10 judges were chosen from 10 Asian cities, each with its own long-established "flavour culture". Impartiality was assured by appointing only wine

journalists, academics in the fields of wine and grape research, sommeliers and other food and beverage professionals who had no conflicts of interest that could have influenced their findings.

Awards were divided into these categories: Best Varietal Classes, Best Style Classes, Best of Asia, Best Value Wines for the Hong Kong Market and Best Wines with Chinese Dishes.

According to the judges, the best wine with abalone is Jacob's Creek Sparkling Rosé. With Kung Pao chicken, Martin & Weyrich Moscato Allegro 2007 is best, while Wairau River Pinot Gris 2009 is great with dim sum and Judas Malbec 2006 complements Peking duck.

Asia's best wines, in their view, are China's Helan Mountain Special Reserve Chardonnay 2008, Japan's Grace Chardonnay 2008 and a New Latitute wine, Thailand's Monsoon Valley Colombar 2009.

Wooring Tree Pinot Noir 2007 won the *South China Morning Post* Trophy for the best Pinot Noir and the best New World Pinot, while a relatively little known champagne, Raoul Collet Blanc de Blancs, won in the best sparkling wine category.

Some of the results, Tam reflected, might surprise international commentators, but he believes they accurately reflect Asian taste preferences, particularly in the Chinese food and wine pairing category.

"What the IWSC has done, even in its first year, is to send a cultural message loud and clear to not just the East but also the entire West that Chinese food really does work with wine. And this is just the beginning, when you consider we now have a strong platform and how many great cuisines there are in this extremely diverse region," Tam said.

"The winner of the best wine pairing for Peking duck is an Argentinian Malbec. This challenges

conventional – particularly Australian – wine wisdom where Pinot Noir is traditionally thought to be the best match."

The judges certainly had their work cut out, according to wine writer Yoshiji Sato, who represented Japan on the panel.

"The quality of the entrants was very high in general, with only a few faulty wines, but there were a lot of New World wines, so I hope the next competition gets more European entrants," he said. "I think our judging was relatively strict. I think even the bronze medal winners were sometimes excellent."

Fellow judge Clara Yip – assistant manager of beverage and catering supplies for Cathay Pacific who is responsible for the airline's wine programme and has been a member of its wine-tasting panel since 1995 – was particularly gratified by the Wooring Tree Pinot Noir's performance. The wine is on Cathay's first class list.

"After we selected the wine last year, I continued to receive e-mails every few weeks from Steve Farquharson, the winery owner, announcing that the wine had won more gold medals. I was very excited to find that the wine got the Best Pinot Noir award in this competition," she said.

Supported by Cathay Pacific, the *South China Morning Post*, The Upper House, Riedel, Crown Wine Cellars and Sea Prince Lonimar Australia, the competition was in many respects a landmark in the development of Asia's own wine culture.

In addition to being a major part of the HKTDC Hong Kong International Wine and Spirits Fair, it was the first wine competition worldwide to boast a truly pan-Asian panel of judges and to be professionally audited by KPMG.

"I definitely believe that we should have a wine competition to symbolise the status of Hong Kong as the wine-trading hub of Asia," Yip said. "I am eager to see it become the most important wine competition in Asia and receive even wider attention from international wine producers and consumers."

## NORTH AMERICAN FLAVOURS ARE A HIT

One noteworthy effect of the Cathay Pacific Hong Kong International Wine and Spirit Competition has been to spotlight the remarkable range of wines available in Hong Kong, not only of excellent quality but also – particularly since the introduction of the zero tax rating – at affordable prices.

Chateau Saint-Lo Saint-Emilion Grand Cru 2006 won the HKTDC Trophy for Best Bordeaux below HK\$300; Piper Heidsieck Cuvee Brut picked up the award for Best Wine with Bubbles below HK\$400; Best White Wine below HK\$150 was Eden Springs High Eden Riesling 2009, and Eden Springs was also selected as Best Red Wine below HK\$200 for its Barossa Valley Shiraz 2007.

Another revelation was the judges' strong approval of a range of North American wines, with 14 awards to California, six to Oregon and three to Washington State. US wine exports to Hong Kong are now number three in the city, after France and Australia.

North American specialist importer The Golden Gate Wine collected no fewer than 23 awards, among them the Trophy Winner for Best Food & Wine

Pairing with Kung Pao chicken for the Martin & Weyrich Moscato Allegro 2007 (pictured).

"This famous Szechuan chicken dish is known for spiciness as well as subtlety of flavours, with special influences of lychee and herbs. The sweet wine with spice and fruit flavours is clearly a complex matching that enhances both the food and the wine," said Golden Gate Wine director Toby Marion.

Another successful contender in the awards was the *South China Morning Post's* partner in SCMP wine, Laitwhaites Wine, which entered 23 bottles, over half of which won medals, including founder Tony Laitwhaites' own chateau wine, La Clariere, Cremant de Loire Langlois Brut and Champagne Renaudin.

"Awards were won on wines from around the world – France, Chile, the United States, New Zealand and Italy – a truly international selection," said

Matthew Aylmer, Laitwhaites general manager Hong Kong and China.

Laitwhaites claims to be the largest fine wine merchant in Britain and, according to Aylmer, believes that the work the company has done in making fine wines more accessible in that market can be replicated in Hong Kong.

"Most of our business is selling quality wine for everyday drinking and because we search out really interesting wines from all over the world we can take our customers on a real voyage of discovery," Aylmer said.

"We guide people with the help of high quality literature – tasting notes, information about the wines and wine makers, food and wine suggestions – so people who generally feel daunted about what to buy and drink will feel confident to try, and then start a lifelong love affair with wine. It also helps people try new wines that they would not otherwise taste."



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