



vintage

Ventures

Hong Kong's burgeoning wine scene offers both the casual wine hobbyist and the serious connoisseur plenty to choose from

hong kong Secrets

BY ROBIN LYNAM

Standing in front of the metal door next to the Red Pepper Restaurant in Causeway Bay, my first impression was that I must have come to the wrong place. The distinctly dingy looking building hardly seemed a likely location for a wine importer's private tasting room. The lock responded to the door code I had been given however, and having established that the lift didn't work I climbed the dusty stairs. Sure enough, there on the third floor was Ivresse Des Muses, and I entered a different world.

Ada Leung, managing director of Cottage Vineyards, is a wine lover and art collector. Ivresse is her gallery, and the venue for tastings of the elegant cold-climate wines she loves, buys, and sells. Milling around the room were a dozen or so of her regular customers there, like me, to try ten wines which in a recent Sopexa tasting of Bordeaux priced at under HKD300 per bottle, had all featured in the top 100. No other importer scored as many.

For many of us, tastings like this one in Ivresse are an increasingly regular feature of our lives. We are looking for the kind of tippie that cannot be found on supermarket shelves, seeking out the nearest equivalents Hong Kong has to the "cellar door" outlets

COURTESY OF CROWN WINE CELLARS

at which wineries sell their own vintages — small specialised companies established by enthusiasts like Leung, most of whom have other business interests and regard the wine trade, at least partly, as a hobby.

I used to go to Cottage tastings back in the 1990s, and was delighted to hear that, after a hiatus of a few years, she was back in the business she loves — even if the staircase to her tasting room did take me aback slightly. Another eccentric note is struck by the presence of a grand piano along with the paintings and porcelain. She holds

musical soirées there as well, and there were a few arty-looking types among the suits, but everybody was focused for the moment on the wines.

Leung's special interest is in wines of high quality which are nevertheless affordable for everyday drinking — a category which expanded vastly when the Financial Secretary announced recently that Hong Kong's tax on imported wines would be slashed from 80 percent to 40 percent. It would probably have grown anyway. Wine appreciation in Hong Kong has become more sophisticated,

and people now generally understand that getting value for money is an element of connoisseurship.

Cottage Vineyards now sources its wines mostly from boutique wineries in France, generally from less well-known regions such as Savoie, and from relatively little known producers in Bordeaux, Burgundy and the Rhone Valley. "I have been able to put together a portfolio of unique fine wines mostly between the range of just a little over HKD100 to just over HKD300," says Leung. "I like to find wines that are interesting and elegant."

I congratulated her on the Sopexa tasting results, which have certainly vindicated her choice of producers. I'm not a great fan of white Bordeaux myself — I prefer Burgundy — but the fruitiness and toasted quality of the Chateau Magneau Graves Blanc Cuvée Julien 2003 certainly hit the spot for me, and seemed to for several others.

There was also general agreement among the group about the 2004 Clos Les Remparts, a complex, chocolatey, silky, perfumed wine of a power that one usually associates with much better known and more expensive names. This one was just a little shy of the HKD300 mark. The tasting group sniffs and sips appreciatively, and Leung is taking orders.

She admits to an old-world palate — shorthand for a preference for wines that aren't as obvious as overtly fruity, alcohol-driven New World wines. There is real quality to be found in the New World too, though, and a lot of small companies are bringing some excellent Australian wine into Hong Kong.



Lined up for tasting.



Peter Chu of Cellarmaster Wines.

JOHN BUTLIN X3

I've always had a soft spot for Aussie wine. The first winemaker I interviewed when I started writing about this subject almost 25 years ago was an Australian, and he helped demystify a process that seemed a lot more mysterious then. Chris Hancock was in Hong Kong to promote Rosemount — then a small, little-known Hunter Valley winery and now a household name around the world.

Accordingly it gives me special pleasure to drop into small Australian "cellar doors" in Hong Kong warehouses and office buildings. It's not quite the same as driving down a dirt road between the vines to a winery annex tasting room, but it'll do. There are operations like Limestone Coast Wines which has an outlet in Horizon Plaza in Ap Lei Chau where people are welcome to taste what's on offer, and Adelaide Cellar Door in Prince's Building in Central which specialises in South Australian boutique wineries, although it also offers some wines from New Zealand.

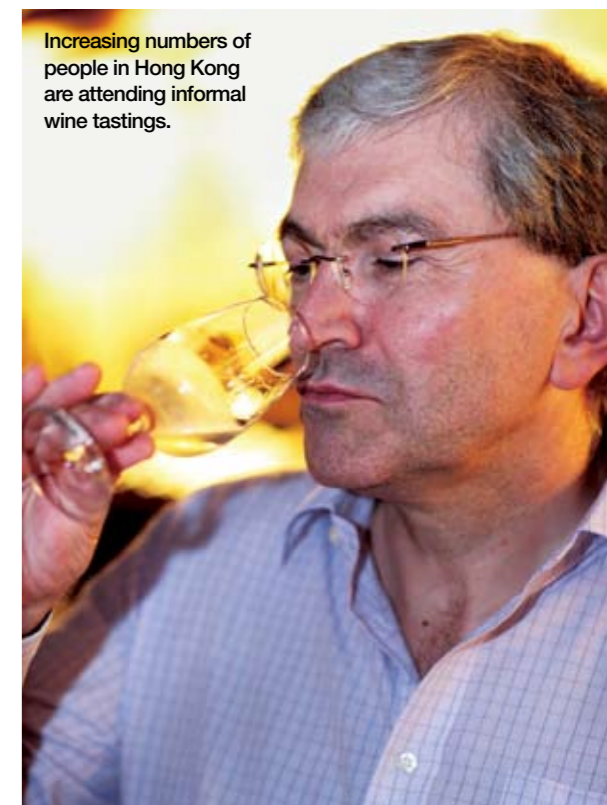
Adelaide Cellar Door, which has been in business in Hong Kong for just over a year, is an Internet-based retail and wholesale operation, but will organise tastings in customers' homes or offices at a cost of HKD150 per head for a minimum of four people. They love their wines and their enthusiasm is infectious.

However, if you want to taste wines in Hong Kong in a place with real atmosphere, you can't beat Crown Wine Cellars. For one thing — uniquely in Hong Kong — these cellars are underground — they were ammunition bunkers constructed by the British army before the Second World War.

The warren of tunnels — acknowledged to be of great historical interest — had fallen into disuse when a South African former diplomat named Greg De'eb had the idea of converting them into what is now perhaps the most sophisticated wine storage facility in the world.

I knew De'eb in his former professional life, and had heard about the idea well before it came to fruition. I have since watched the growth and development of the operation with considerable interest. It is a private members' club, but one which non-members can visit by invitation, and those invitations are extended to customers of a number of small wine importers who use Crown's services. Crown, which acts as the consignee, handles storage and delivery to their customers, and tastings are held at the club. Most of the smaller merchants using Crown's services specialise in higher-value wines — rare vintages, collectible and hard to obtain bottles — which can cost thousands of dollars but are deemed more than worthwhile by connoisseurs.

Companies now working with Crown Wine Cellars on this basis include Platinum Wines, which specialises in Australian collectible wines; Australian Wine Centre, which specialises in Margaret River boutique wineries; another Australian specialist Vosart; Frux which brings in wines from New Zealand, Australia and South Africa; Mildking which brings in wines from Italy; Cellarmaster which has expertise in sourcing rare old wines; and Cape Wine & Rooibos Tea Specialist which focuses on South African wines.



Increasing numbers of people in Hong Kong are attending informal wine tastings.

I visited Crown recently to attend a South African wine dinner and had the rare pleasure of tasting Klein Constantia. This was first produced in 1689 — not all New World wines are that new — and regarded for many years as one of the great wines of the world. It is now recovering that reputation. Sweet, luscious, honeyed and just a little smoky, it was quite something to sip.

Generally speaking, the small wine importers working with Crown cater to wine lovers looking for something a little out of

the ordinary. “Every Tuesday night we have a members and guests evening, and virtually every one of those is frequented by a visiting winemaker who is represented by one of these guys and who would have a range of those wines available,” De’eb, a great wine lover, enthuses.

I have attended one or two of these, and they are memorable evenings. Jackets and ties are banned, and there are no lectures on the wines. Instead, there is good informal conversation among wine lovers with the winemaker mingling with guests throughout the evening. I’m not the only one to have left at two in the morning and flagged a cab rather than opting to drive home.

Crown is likely to stay busy. Wealthy wine lovers who used to keep most of their wines overseas are now choosing to ship them home. Most of these are high-value bottles, which would previously have incurred huge tax bills once imported here.

With prices now reduced and good-quality wines becoming more affordable, we can expect to see local wine tastings becoming more and more regular events. It is worth remembering though, that the government has warned that the duty reduction is not necessarily permanent. This could be a good time to invest in quality wine, both to drink now and to lay down for the future in Hong Kong. ■



Crown Wine Cellars offers ambience along with its fine wine collection.

info



Time to taste...

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