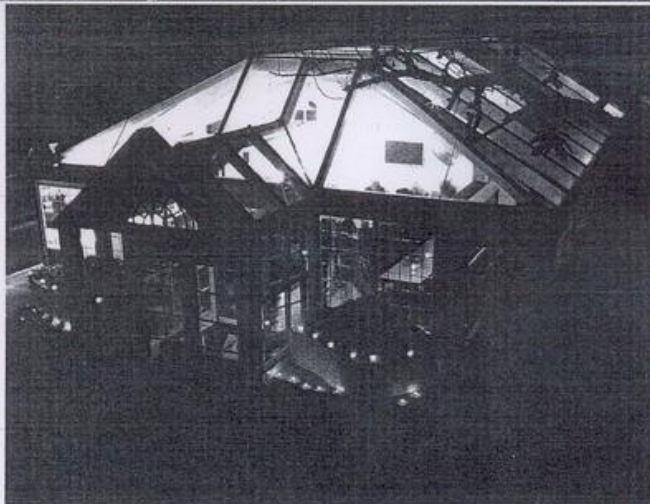


Show Your Bottle



Crown Wine Cellars is tucked away among former World War II bunkers in Shouson Hill.

There are a growing amount of places to learn about the finer points of wine.

By Scott Murphy

Most people in this city know that the French do it. If push comes to shove, they also know that the Californians and Italians do it. A select few may even know that they do it in Australia, New Zealand and Chile too. Yet the truth is that many more countries also do it in a variety of ways. In Hawaii, shockingly, they even do it with pineapples. Yes, of course, we're talking about creating a vineyard, pressing, for the most part, grapes, and getting down to the fine art of making quality wine.

But aside from those who have really attempted to learn, many in this city would

surely agree that their knowledge about wine starts and stops with a house white, red, and on special occasions, a glass of champagne. According to Gregory De'eb, general manager at the just-opened Crown Wine Cellars in Shouson Hill, "Hong Kong has the lowest per capita wine consumption of any developed city in the world." At 10.2 million liters for 7.2 million people, that's the equivalent of only 1.3 liters per person a year, far below the 60-75 liters (per person) consumed in a European country like France. This, he claims, "is due to expense and the fact that there's no educational drive in Hong Kong."

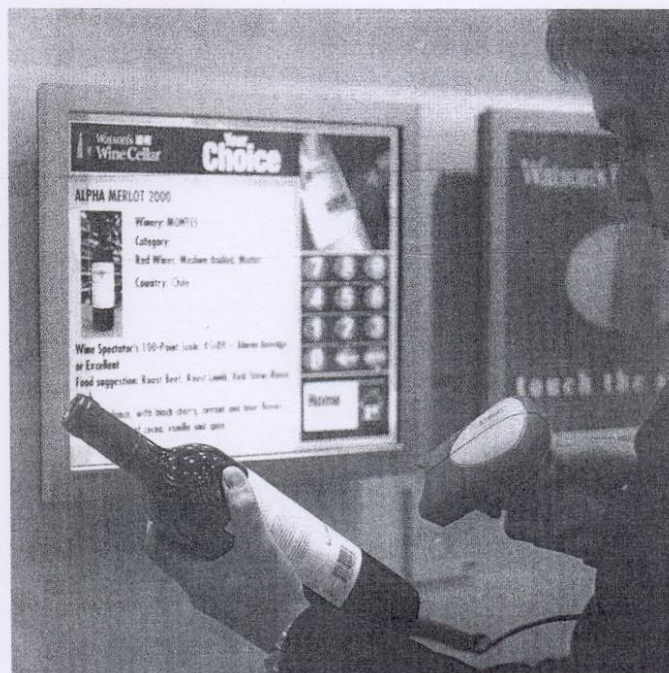
Acquiring the Taste

There are signs, however, that this is changing. The continued expansion of Watson's Wine Cellar, including their recently opened Lee Gardens outlet that features an interactive kiosk, points to a growing interest. Restaurants like **Mint** (G/F, 122-126 Canton Rd., Tsimshatsui, 2735-5887) are holding more and more well-attended wine tasting dinners. This could be in part thanks to people like Simon Tam, a longtime winemaker and the man behind the four-year-old **International Wine Centre** (20C Right Emperor Bldg., 122-126 Wellington St., Central, 2549-0181, www.iwinecentre.com), the "only full time wine center in Asia," he says. As Tam explains, learning to tell the difference between the finer points of a Cabernet-Sauvignon, a Shiraz or a special Chardonnay doesn't have to be intimidating. "Knowledge makes the most important consumer when it comes to wine," says Tam.

Tam has been in the industry for over 20 years, and is a qualified wine and cheese maker in addition to being a chef. Currently he's studying for his Master of Wine Accreditation from London, which he claims is "the holy grail" since there are only 220 such masters in the world. His idea behind the International Wine Center is to teach others, in a very non-intimidating atmosphere, simply how to enjoy wine. "If you don't know wine, you have no enjoyment but to stare at the label, and that's pretty thin. If you know wine, you can know what food to pair with what. Once you learn how to taste wine, you don't forget."

Anyone of legal drinking age can attend his center. Tam's current client base is quite young, a mixture of expat and local professionals in their 20s to early 30s. The center hosts a variety of classes, seminars and tastings for special interests. For example, classes run one evening a week for four consecutive weeks, and advanced students can even receive international accreditation. Tasting seminars are also often held on Saturday afternoons. And he is careful to point out that he's not selling wine. "Our clients can expect no pressurized sales and 100 percent objective, independent advice. We have no hidden agenda."

The four-week class fee of \$2,500 may seem like an expensive price to pay to learn about the finer points of wine, but Tam says that a lot goes in to such courses. For starters, he points out that the knowledge accumulated is a lot more than just spending that same amount of money casually drinking. During the course, Tam, along with the other instructors at the center, make "relevant sense of technical knowledge," discussing winemaking techniques and how temperatures affect wine. By the end of the four beginner sessions, Tam is adamant that students are able to tell the difference between European wines and wines from other regions. They'll be able to tell the dif-



The new Watson's Wine Cellar in Lee Gardens Two has an interactive kiosk.

they'd like to have stored. Second, De'eb says they have contacted as many local and international wine centers as they could, as well as local distributors, wine societies and wine organizations, to let them know about the new venue. "For the longest time people have done formal wine dinners that have been done in hotels and restaurants. We allow people to mix and blend their own wines in the cellars, then taste them, so that they can purely enjoy the wine." Finally, since it's not a private members club or a country club, he hopes to appeal to people who either want a home away from home, or for those who already have club fatigue. "The rationale is to allow members to store their wines in the cellars and then have them enjoy their wine in the club, with no mark-up. It's your wine."

With 100 current members, De'eb is aiming for a ceiling of 860 full-fledged members, who will pay different rates according to what type of membership and storage perks they would like to have. But this is just the beginning. Already, De'eb has held several unique, private functions at the venue. Though no formal plans are established yet, both De'eb and Thompson agree that there will probably be some form of wine education tastings or seminars held at the Cellars, especially since they both believe that the local population will want to learn about wine. As De'eb, an obvious wine lover, explains in summation, "The best thing you can do for yourself is to learn the basics of wine."

Paul Liversedge, the general manager at **Watson's Wine Cellar** (Shop G03, G/F Lee Gardens Two, 28 Yan Ping Rd., Causeway Bay, 3151-7628; and eight other locations), agrees with that assessment. "Know first of all how to enjoy it and how to taste it. The tasting side is important. It's very useful to know what region a wine is from, grape variety, style of the wine and what food it goes with." To that end, Watson's holds informal wine tastings every weekend, on Friday, Saturday and Sunday afternoons, at all of their stores. He believes such sessions, during which customers aren't pressured to buy, gives customers a bit more confidence in what they are doing. Staff members know what they are talking about since all of them go through what is known as the basic Wine And Spirits Education Trust to receive a basic certificate. There is talk of education classes for the general public, but nothing has been finalized as of yet. At the moment, Liversedge says the recently opened interactive kiosk will also be a feature in more new stores set to open later this year. As for the potential of the just opened Crown Wine Cellar, he believes it's "superb, a fantastic idea."

There are still other options for those who wish to learn more about wine. There are several wine societies in the city. And there's at least one active restaurant that believes in wine education: Mint. They hold periodic dinners where distinguished, knowledgeable winemakers or wine authorities are invited to educate guests about particular regions of wine. Typically, half a dozen to a dozen wines are sampled during the course of a meal. The dinners are proving to be especially popular with the local population. As a result, many of the seminars are held in Cantonese. Since the dinners are held somewhat irregularly, it's best to call them for details of upcoming events.



Mint hosts occasional wine dinners, where food pairing is emphasized.

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