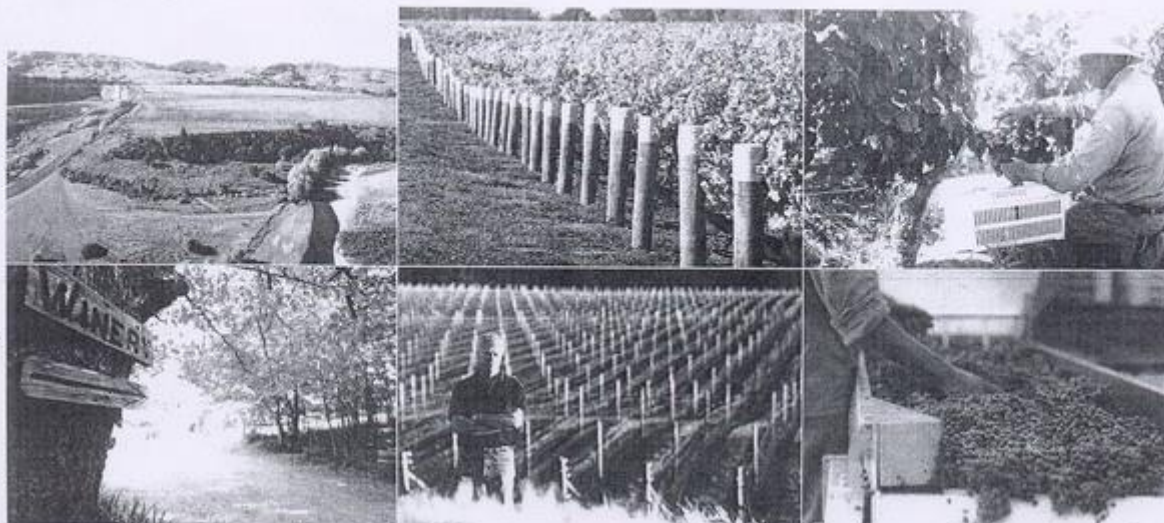


■ ■ dining



SCENES FROM THE NEW WORLD (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): SACRED HILL AND MARLBOROUGH VINEYARDS, NEW ZEALAND; PICKING A SORTING AT ARGENTINA'S TRAPICHE VINEYARD; SACRED HILL'S TONY BISH AT RIFLEMAN'S VINEYARD IN NZ; CELLAR DOOR WINERY IN MAS

Wine's New World Order

With the annual Wines of the Pacific competition taking place next week, Bruce Dawson finds out what makes new world wines so popular in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong loves new world wines. We like them for their drinkability, their unpretentiousness, their easy-to-understand labelling... and their price. If you've ever wondered what all the fuss is about, next weekend offers perhaps your best chance to find out. The 16th annual Wines of the Pacific (Winpac) Competition takes place on January 28 and 29, offering the public a chance to try up to 1,000 wines from Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Argentina, South Africa, the United States and Canada. Competition winners will be immediately available for purchase at a discount.

"It's a lot of fun," says Jebson Fine Wines general manager Gavin Jones of the WINPAC competition, which he has been attending since it started in 1989. "A big difference with this event is that there's no snobbery, as new world wines are easy to define. It's changed a lot in the past 10 years; the assortment and range of choices is much greater now."

That may be understating it somewhat. In 2004, wines from Australia and Chile alone accounted for almost 40 percent of the imported wine in Hong Kong, says wine distributor Patricio de la Fuente Saez, director of Links Concept. "New world wines have taken Hong Kong by storm, with Australia and Chile leading the way. Ten years ago, these two wine-producing countries were not even in the top 10," he says.

Why this sudden burst of interest? Winpac competition founder Sir Noel Powell explains: "There was always a wine-drinking public, but over the years many Hong Kong people have either travelled abroad and come back with new tastes or are more open to expanding their wine experience from traditional wines. Once below the top rank of wines, you get much better value for money with new world wines."

Makers of new world wines have been smart about identifying and occupying a niche in the lower- to medium-price brackets. "Their marketing has been superb, as has their consistency of quality," says Gregory De'eb, general manager of Crown Wine Cellars. "French wines can charge such high prices because they are acknowledged as the 'Rolls-Royce' of wines. New world wines from places like South Africa can never charge those prices. Wine is a journey. There are times when I want to travel in a Rolls-Royce, sometimes a sports car, or even a Mini. Wine is exactly the same. For the first time you can find a wide variety of wines in cellars and on menus, and even a \$100 wine can be greatly enjoyed."

Changing drinking habits are another important factor. "Wine is the new cocktail," says the managing director of the Eclipse restaurant group, Clayton Parker. "Instead of a few cocktails, it's a few glasses of wine. It's being drunk in a non-food environment, as a bar beverage. People are switching to easier-drinking wines: lighter wines, more refreshing, crisper, lighter reds are popular. People aren't trying to drink less, just making different choices, and they think wine is a healthier choice," he says. "They generally market themselves through a varietals name [cabernet, shiraz, and so on]. A lot of the old world wines don't specify; you're just expected to know what variety is supposed to be in it, which can be very confusing for all but the experts."

It's a point with which sommelier Martina Priadka of LKF Entertainments agrees. "New world wine is styled more as a beverage wine, a wine you can drink without food and still enjoy. Old world wines revolved around food, it was about putting a bottle on the table for lunch or dinner. Levels of wine education are rising, from not drinking wine at all to learning about all the well-known names, and now it's turning into a more educated culture that can choose a drink for their mood."

But the rising popularity of new world wines in Hong Kong has not sounded the death knell for old world varieties. As the general manager of Watson's Wine Cellar, Paul Liversedge, points out: "Bordeaux is still important to us. We sell more bottles of new world, but because Bordeaux is more expensive per bottle our total sales value of French wines is still greater than new world. In ParkShop, people understand the [new world] labels—they're branded, which makes it easy and gives

people confidence. Australia has been strong for the past several years and now we see New Zealand sauvignon blancs [coming through]."

Try them yourself at the Winpac event on Saturday, January 29, when wine drinkers and enthusiasts alike will have three different options to choose from: Pure Tasting (\$250) offers four hours of unlimited tasting and sampling from 2pm-6pm. Vineyard Lunch (\$500), is a buffet in the Mandarin Grill with a selection of the finest show wines. And Lunch with the Names (\$650) is a four course lunch by the chefs of the Chinnery Bar hosted by Sir Noel Powell. Both lunch options include six hours' unlimited tasting and sampling from noon-6pm.

"There is no event in Asia that I know of that brings this many wine consumers, suppliers (and wines) together," says de la Fuente Saez. "It's a great day out for everyone that enjoys a good glass of wine."

The 16th Annual Winpac Festival, the Mandarin Oriental, Fri Jan 28-29. Tickets available from the International Wine and Food Society, 2203-2368, www.winpac-hk.com, and the Mandarin Cake Shop, 2825-4890, mohkg-cakeshop@mohkg.com. ■

