

The Year in Wine

Beijing's 2008 grapevine

by Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker

In such a momentous year, it is no accident Beijing's vinous culture showed new colors. Charity wine dinners in support of earthquake relief became a regular feature. During the Olympics, however, the wine world was strangely quiet. While some importers joyously supplied wine to corporate events – if they could squeeze past official sponsor wine Great Wall – others were downbeat about getting their wines due exposure. By the Paralympics, business was seemingly back to normal.

And nowadays it's remarkably easy to fill your tasting diary. In previous years, the major importers offered mainly winemaker dinners and the occasional tasting. But in 2008, the frequency of tasting events was higher with some new formats floating around. Capitalizing on Torres China's 2007 Taste of the Nations, Palette Vino offered two "grand tastings" in its Central Park and Shunyi locations. The "100 wines for 100 *kuai*" routine was a hit. Portfolio tastings caught on with ASC and Jebesen following suit, although Jebesen tried a different tack by offering significant discounts. More educational tastings from the likes of the Wine Republic helped shake off the tired "wine tasting party" theme.

Wine trade bodies are now also stopping in Beijing more regularly. Bordeaux's Union des Grand Crus continues to visit the capital in November as part of its Asia tour. But Vintality has now become a presence, most

recently with its tasting at the Ritz-Carlton, Chaoyang. Expect to see Wine Australia doing more here too. The California Wine Institute didn't quite get the word around for its October tasting at 1949 – The Hidden City, but will hopefully improve the lot of California's wines here in the future.

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value on imports, provoking public accusations and recriminations. Thankfully, the diversity of wines available in Beijing only increased by leaps and bounds. New kids on the block like Watson's and Links China have added some spice to the mix, drawing on new labels and their experience in other

parts of China and Hong Kong. Globus Fine Wines of Shanghai is now distributing in Beijing and most importers, especially Summergate, have shaken up their portfolios to attract consumers with new wines.

Wine bars, wine clubs and new storage facilities are popping up everywhere too. Crown Cellars is located a little further out of town, but has excellent storage. Aussino has opened a three-level cellar, wine bar and shop on Dongzhong Jie. More interesting wine bars like Enoteca in The Place provide genuine value and variety, offering a decent bottle of wine at only RMB 98. With improvements in wine service at the highest level (Maison Boulud, Sureno, Grange, etc.) and new wine blogs adding to the debate, we hope 2009 can only get better!

Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker run Dragon Phoenix Fine Wine Consulting (www.longfeng-wines.com), Beijing's first independent wine consultancy, and are authors of the Dragon Phoenix Wine Blog.

SELECT SIPS

One to quaff:

2005 Chiaro Primitivo IGT, Puglia, Italy (RMB 98)

Primitivo is the same as Zinfandel, California's distinctive black grape. However, in Italy's Puglia region, it shows higher acidity and is known as a great "food wine." Medium purple-red in color. Expect lovely red cherry fruit with some cinnamon notes and a generous palate with lifting acidity, chewy medium tannins and good length for the price point. (Available from Jebesen, www.jebesen-finewines.com)

One to drink:

2005 Chateau des Estubiers, Chapoutier, Coteaux du Tricastin, France (RMB 219)

This is a blend of Grenache and Syrah from the legendary Michel Chapoutier, but from a less well-known region in France's Southern Rhone. Dark purple in color, the wine carries some distinctive spice from each grape, with black and red fruits on the nose. Lovely palate – and it's organic as well. (Available from Torres China, www.torreschina.com)

One to savor:

2005 Yering Station Reserve Shiraz-Viognier, Yarra Valley, Australia (RMB 767)

This is one of Australia's top blends of Shiraz with the white aromatic variety Viognier. It has a beautiful dark purple color, a rich nose of black cherry and blueberry fruit, with Viognier's perfume and a powerful but silken palate. (Available from The Wine Republic, www.thewinerepublic.com)

