

BARGAIN HUNTING?

BEIJING'S LATEST WINE LISTS

by Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker

In cash-strapped times, the first things consumers stop buying are luxury items. For committed wine-lovers, of course, wine is a necessity. But economists and sociologists would not class the drink in the necessity bracket. These are hard times, therefore, for restaurants and F&B managers in any city. People have to eat – but fine wine is something consumers are less willing to splurge on.

Clearly, Beijing has had a rough few months. Hotels running at under-capacity during the Olympics, the global economic slowdown and the dreadful fate of the not-even opened Mandarin Oriental have cast a gloomy mood. But in this Restaurant Awards issue, we want to commend those establishments with genuinely creative wine lists and whose sensible pricing policies counter one of the more depressing aspects of fledgling wine markets. At some restaurants, extortionate mark-ups often in excess of 300 percent – that's over retail, not wholesale prices! – capitalize on would-be wine lovers' lack of knowledge. As China consumers are already paying a premium for international wines, you do have to look long and hard for "bargains."

Beijing remains attractive for visiting winemakers, with increasing competition among importers

It's not all doom and gloom. Beijing remains an attractive city for visiting winemakers, with increasing competition among importers. The wines we recommend this month all come from distributors new to Beijing who established themselves elsewhere before coming north. Sommelier quality is also increasingly important for restaurants. Admittedly, just about anyone who opens and pours a bottle of wine here claims dubious "sommelier" status. But things are improving. Eric Tian, of the repackaged Domus, trained at Neil Perry's Rockpool in Sydney; Peter Teng of the new Wangfujing Hilton brings considerable



experience from Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Both are Certified Sommeliers under the Court of Master Sommeliers program and, importantly, Mandarin-speakers.

Which restaurants have innovative lists? Sureño at The Opposite House continues to thrive, not just for its affordable Mediterranean fare, but because of its diverse and well-priced wine selections (with bottles from RMB 200 and up, in a list conveniently organized by grape varieties). Mosto likewise deserves mention for affordability and an approachable, concise list organized by wine styles ("Fragrant Whites," "Spicier Reds," etc.). Alex Molina and team have also now installed an Enomatic system. This allows wines sealed under inert gas to be served by the glass – a great idea.

At the highest level, Maison Boulud leads the way. You might think a restaurant

established by a celebrity chef might feature a top-heavy list armed with trophy bottles at ludicrous prices. But Koen Masschelein, Beijing's leading sommelier, has chosen a great range with reasonable mark-ups and exemplary service.

Certainly, several other venues bring together well-managed lists and a serious effort to select from several importers; they include The CourtYard, Pinot Brasserie, Grange, Cepe and Aria. We just hope these and other venues find innovative ways to attract wine drinkers as we all ride out the economic storm.

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

2007 Spy Valley Pinot Noir, Marlborough, New Zealand (RMB 158)

Dark purple-red color. The nose offers kirsch and black cherry fruit with sweet oak-induced spices (cinnamon, vanilla) and Pinot's perfumed notes. The palate has silky low-medium tannins, lovely fruit and refreshing high acidity. Very food-friendly and great value. (Available from Watson's Fine Wines; contact Lily Li: lilyli@aswv.com.hk)

One to drink

2001 Beronia Rioja Reserva, Spain (RMB 264)

Medium purple-red color with distinct orange rim. This Rioja, made principally from the Tempranillo grape, boasts strawberry and red plum fruit with sweet and savory vanilla oak aromas. The palate is developing with mellow-

ing fruit, medium acidity and medium chewy tannins. Try with roast pork in all forms. (Available from Links China, contact Aladin Laroussi: aladin@linkschina.com.cn)

One to savor

NV Egly-Ouriet Brut Tradition Champagne, France (RMB 778)

From old vines, this superb Champagne is 75% Pinot Noir and 25% Chardonnay. Deep gold color. The nose has perfumed citrus fruits with yeasty, biscuit aromas. Palate is long and complex with elegant acidity and moderate "dosage" (giving an essentially dry wine). One of the top small-production Champagnes, this is outstanding as an aperitif or with seafood. (Available from Globus Fine Wines; contact David Emer: david@globuswine.com)