

Acquiring the taste



To make Hong Kong a credible wine hub, encouraging wine knowledge will become at least as big a priority as developing logistics and commercial

platforms. While the Hong Kong authorities have announced measures to create partnerships with overseas wine education providers, wine tasting classes are expected to mushroom in the SAR itself. Long-established restaurant owner and wine tasting trainer Wilson Kwok shares his views on what can be done to improve connoisseurship in Hong Kong. Website: www.wsentrecote.com



"Sommelier is actually a very 'European' professional training which has no equivalent in Hong Kong". Wilson Kwok

What is your core activity?

I am both a restaurant owner (I launched the Entrecote Restaurant in Hong Kong in 1993) and a wine teacher. I organise classes in the Entrecote's premises but I am also sometimes asked to contribute at universities or in other places. Under the CIVB (Comité Interprofessionnel des Vins de Bordeaux) umbrella, I am a speaker for various events revolving around wine tasting. I also write feature articles about wines and I am a member of various juries, for sommeliers or cooking competitions.

Is the recent tax cut on wines and the decision by the government to make Hong Kong the next wine hub encouraging for your business?

Yes, of course. That said, one of the big deterrents in the business remains the price of rents. Locating restaurants on the ground floor is really too expensive. It costs at least five or six times more than being installed on, say, the 6th floor, like we are. That is the reason why you find so many banks and jewellers on the ground floor in Hong Kong – only those businesses can afford it.

Who takes part in your wine tasting classes and what are their motivations?

We have many kinds of people coming but I would say most are people who actually work in the wine industry – like wine sellers – and those who want to know more about it. But we also have bankers who are very concerned about

“pleasing” their clients and want to know more about wine so they can organize lunches or dinners and treat their clients to good wines.

Have Hong Kong people a special relationship with wine?

Hong Kong is quite a cosmopolitan town and wine has been part of the city lifestyle for some time now.

For years, it was the privilege of the “old money” families who have been spending on wine for generations. At the time, it was mainly the British, but now most of the long-established and wealthy members of this community are gone. Now you find young British people who also spend a lot, but they do not really have the refined taste, nor the curiosity to explore old fine wines.

Do Hong Kong consumers prefer red or white?

Red wines are at present the most popular in Hong Kong, but that hasn't always been the case. Twenty years ago, when I worked for wine importer Ruttonjee & Son in Hong Kong, 65% of the French wines we imported were white wines (Burgundy, Chablis, wines of the Loire Valley . . .) with red only representing 35%. It really changed when the Americans started talking about the French Paradox in the 1990's and the fact that red wine – because of its antioxidant proprieties – is good for health.

What is your opinion on wine education in Hong Kong?

There are not many classes or diplomas qualifying you as a

professional wine connoisseur in Hong Kong. There is the WSET (Wines & Spirits Education Trust), there are classes at Poly U. There is also the Association of Sommeliers which gathers professional members like bar manager, bar captain or beverage manager – but there are no sommeliers as such! Sommelier is actually a very “European” professional training which has no equivalent in HK. In prestigious restaurants like Caprice or Gaddis, the management calls on qualified expat French sommeliers.

What should be the government's role in encouraging wine knowledge in HK?

I think the wine industry is something the government does not really

know or understand. If one day they want to organize something with the main players of this industry, I think they should call on professional organisations like the Association Professionnelle des Sommeliers, Sopexa, or the foreign Chambers of Commerce.

What is your definition of a connoisseur?

A connoisseur to me is someone who does not show off. They only share their knowledge when they are asked to. It is not someone who is talking all the time like he is trying to sell his wine. A connoisseur is also someone who keeps on learning things, who asks advice, and who really wants to perfect his expertise. **E**

Spotlight on wine courses in Hong Kong

Although the HKTDC strongly recognizes that “without proper education in different facets of the [wine] business, a strong foundation for a new industry and a sustainable base for talent cannot be built,” it is today very difficult to assess how well and to what extent wine education is being provided in Hong Kong.

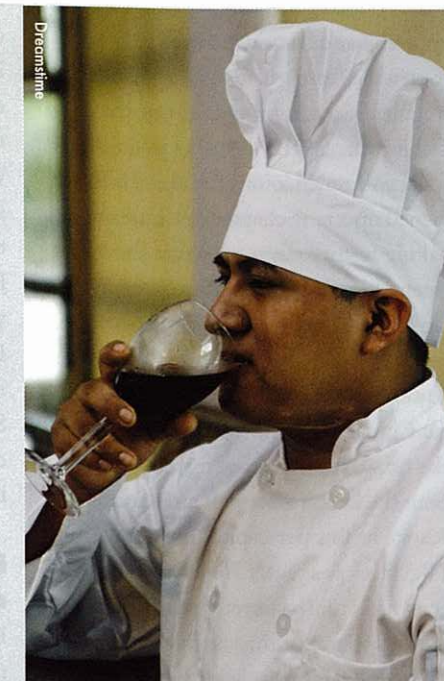
Universities in HK do not provide any specific training entirely dedicated to wines. There are catering studies or tourism studies which include wine training, but those courses only constitute a small part of the curriculum.

Many organizations in HK do offer wine training courses, but it is impossible to find any official information on how many there are or which ones are considered serious players within the industry.

(Sopexa, for instance, partners with HK accredited schools like Fine Wine School, HITDC, IVE Haking Wong, HKMA and ASWEC).

Each organization/school has its own offer and issues its own certificate, but most of these certificates are not recognized internationally. Some are accepted by the local trade, and a few across Asia.

Britain's reputable WSET (Wine and Spirit Education Trust) wine courses are available in HK through eight organizations (see www.wset.co.uk) which provide WSET certificates at beginner or intermediate levels. However, there is only one HK course provider offering WSET at diploma level (ie, at the more advanced level, a stepping-stone to the Master of Wine qualification). WSET courses are



geared towards the wine trade industry – with the Diploma in particular containing a large element solely on the business of wine.

¹ Source: Study on Hong Kong as a Wine Trading and Distribution Centre by HKTDC's Research Department.