



"BEI FUNG TONG" FRIED CRABS WITH GARLIC

Bei Fung Tong is the Chinese name for Causeway Bay's Typhoon boat shelter. It was one of Hong Kong's oldest tourist attractions. In the glorious 60's, 70's and up to the early 80's, the whole area would light up with floating sampan 'dai pai dong' and Chinese opera signers. 'Bei Fung Tong' style seafood is effectively deep fried to seal in the sweet juice then stirred fried with copious amount of aromatics such as garlic, ginger, spring onion and chili to order. It is then topped with more crunchy granules of deep fried garlic. The cooking style is deliciously oily and robust in flavours. The ideal wine needs to have freshness, richness of flavours and a splash of assertive acidity.

PERFECT WINES FOR "BEI FUNG TONG" FRIED CRABS

BY SIMON TAM



PASCAL JOLIVET 'EXCEPTIONNEL' POUILLY FUME

LOIRE VALLEY, FRANCE

Distributed by Summergate Fine Wines. Tel: 2875 2566

To Kiwi convertees, this is possibly the strangest Sauvignon Blanc on the planet. It is in fact one of the classiest around. You take the finest fruit from your best vineyard, pick them when they are ready and happy, ask them nicely to slowly transform into one of the top classic wines of the world and you have this 'Exceptionnel' Pouilly Fume. It is all about smoky minerals, some wine experts (not me) describes it as having taste of quartz (I have never intentionally put a quartz watch in my mouth to analysis). The affable Pascal is perhaps too young and handsome (he is married) to be taken seriously by the wine world, so he set out to let his wine do the talking. This is a perfect match with the succulent mud crab in Bei fung Tong crab. The spice, deep fried garlic, shallots ginger are all enhanced by this stunning wine.

CLOUDY BAY SAUVIGNON BLANC

MARLBOROUGH, NEW ZEALAND

Distributed by Goodtime distributor

Tel: 2833 5581



Every year my International Wine Centre in Hong Kong and Shanghai host an 'Is Cloudy Bay still the best Sauvignon Blanc' blind tasting. Where wine lovers decide amongst 10 or so

NZ SB from the same year. There is a good reason why this wine is still going on strong after more than 20 vintages, why it is still the reference point for many consumers and more befitting why Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc is beginning to suffer 'tall poppy syndrome' in some corners. Dollar for dollar, a better SB is hard to find. It is a perfect match with the yummy, messy crabs. The pure SB fruit raises the crabs' freshness and offers a tasty platform to showcase the mixture of aromatics. The lively Cloudy Bay acidity offer some relieve to an otherwise oily dish. Serve the wine just cold, NOT freezing to touch!

CLOS HENRI SAUVIGNON BLANC

MARLBOROUGH, NEW ZEALAND

Distributed by ASC Macau

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We have a classic French wine and an iconic new world above; this is something different, a 10th generation French wine icon making wine in the new world. Henri Bourgeois of Sancerre set up Henri Bourgeois Marlborough 2000, their first vintage was in 2003. Predictably, the wine is a hybrid between the subtleties of French Sancerre and the vibrancy of the best of Marlborough. This is a perfect match with Bei Fung Tong fried crabs, the wine's deep fruit richness is the perfect with the base note of the fried garlic earthy shallots. The tropical fruity notes highlights the crab's freshness and give some relieve to the chili heat.

CHINA SEEMS LIKE AN ODD PLAYER IN A WESTERN-DOMINATED WINE WORLD

Simon Tam explains why it is unfair for western connoisseurs to condemn Chinese wines to oblivion in an industry that has just started to grow

RECENT STATISTICS show that China is actually now the sixth largest grape producer in the world, knocking Australia down to the seventh spot. This figure will no doubt have come as a surprise to those making the common assumptions that China has no wine drinking culture and that grapes are always turned into wine.

There is actually a huge wine drinking culture in China and almost all of the wine produced there gets drunk there. There are obvious socio-economic constraints though and an average bottle has to sell for RMB30-50. A bottle of Côte du Rhône that has a lowest possible price at around the RMB160 mark is just going to seem like a flippant luxury to most Chinese consumers.

Reliable Chinese statistics on grapes and wine are relatively new, going back to about 1995 and these also show that while China grows a huge amount of grapes most of these are for eating, either fresh or dried. Another staggering number to bear in mind is the bulk wine imported in 2007 – enough to fill 130 million bottles. This is slightly less than the total amount sold by China's three biggest producers: Great Wall, Changyu and Dynasty. Imported bulk wines are mixed with local product to become, in essence, Chinese wines.

Those grapes would not be grown and that wine not imported if China had no wine-drinking culture.

No serious effort has yet been made to export Chinese wines. China has yet to acquire the centuries old status of classic exporting countries like France and Italy. Exports are most likely to be seen as exotic bottles in Chinese restaurants around the world. Despite the ingenuity of a system that means you can enjoy a Chinese wine with Chinese food in Buenos Aires or Verona, the unwillingness of

Chinese exporters to allow their product to compete shoulder-to-shoulder with that from other countries is really indicative of a lack of quality-mindedness.

Jancis Robinson MW and OBE was less than flattering about Chinese wine when she paid a recent visit to my International Wine Centre in Shanghai. To take one example of slightly purple prose from her purple-paged website:

"It seems strange that the Chinese to whom food is so important and about which they are naturally so critical, seem to swallow substandard wines so willingly."

The quote sums up current attitudes to Chinese wine as viewed from outside China.

As much as Robinson is famous and has an admirable understanding of wines at all levels from the most basic table wine to the world's greatest, she is not really taking into account the great extent to which Chinese wine is currently made for Chinese consumers. Those consumers have expectations of quality for the price they are willing to pay, which is currently £2-3 (MOP 32 to MOP48). It is my belief that wine always has to be chosen very carefully within that price bracket regardless.

Nonetheless Robinson found five wines out of 40 that she considered notable. They were:

Catai Superior Cabernet Sauvignon 2003 Shandong

Château Junding Oriental Dry Red Bordeaux Blend 2005 Shandong

Grace Vineyard Chairman's Reserve 2005 Shanxi

Great Wall Huaxia Vineyard A Bordeaux Blend 2005 Hebei (Changli)

Great Wall Huaxia Vineyard B Bordeaux Blend 1998 Hebei (Changli).

I have been involved with the Chinese wine industry for 15 years, originally as an observer and wine judge, then as an integrated component selling gadgets and supplies to winemakers and then making a 360° turn to become an impartial commentator. I have seen a vast improvement in Chinese wines over the years but it is true that there remains very little absolute technical knowledge.

The situation is unlikely to improve until politics change and China's eager students can go to the great Châteaux of Bordeaux, the estates of Burgundy or the Australian wineries or the geographically and climatically diverse vineyards of Europe. Until such opportunities are available China will have little chance to catch up with the rest of the world and raise its own standards.

Some winemakers could even benefit from travel to the southern hemisphere, where they could notch up two vintages a year instead of the one they are exposed to in China.

China has only really had the best of the world's winemaking technology available to it for the last 15 years. In a diverse country stretching from a Japan-facing coast to the borders of Vietnam, the geological and climatic reports that would show the best grape-growing locations have not always been available. With their vineyards not always in the best locations, but still deeply rooted winemakers need to call on all the options in the winemaker's arsenal to improve on what nature has given them.

As China's consumers grow more sophisticated and affluent a certain amount of 'natural selection' is bound to come into the process of choosing what ends up on the table. A choice is already emerging between traditional China-made wines and imports from classic wine countries. As China's consumers become more familiar with these wines they will start demanding more from their own producers.

Perhaps I have let Robinson's comments get a little too much under my skin, but I would like to point out another reason why the Chinese "seem to swallow substandard wine so willingly".

There is a huge difference between the Western and Chinese way of consuming wine at a meal. In general, Westerners will enjoy wine throughout a meal and have no objection – indeed positively enjoy – having a mouthful of food and wine at the same time. Hence the culture of the sommelier who helps relieve restaurant guests of the contents of their wallets by matching food and wine. Chinese people are unlikely to drink a liquid with food that conflicts with the temperature of the food. The Chinese eat and then drink – there is no integration of food and drink at the same time. They are likely to clear their palate with their own saliva or tea. They also see wine as a palate cleanser, to be swooshed down. Inferior wines simply doesn't stay in the Chinese palate long enough to do damage.

If as an Australian-Chinese I may be allowed a few further sweeping generalizations, the Chinese are more likely to sip and savour food where Westerners are more open to consuming food and wine at the same time with less focus on the food alone.

Without wanting to resort to special pleading, I would suggest that it is too early to judge China's very young wine industry. A judgment on the fledgling French industry could seem quite harsh. When winemaking in France was starting out as industry 120 years ago it was common for it to import bulk wines from colonies and blend them with its own so they became French wines. Inter-region blends sold as the product of one region were not uncommon.

China may have its teething problems but it is open-minded enough to learn from the masters around the world. It is not realistic though to compare and contrast the output of the young seedling with the fruit of the old bough.

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