



red

by Tara Q. Thomas

RISING

Pairing wine with Chinese food

Zachary Yu, a young, energetic sommelier with rock-star hair and a card that reads “Wine Guy,” walks us to a table in the back of the *Ming Court* dining room. Last year, the restaurant on the sixth floor of Hong Kong’s Langham Place Hotel made a bid to become the city’s go-to spot for Chinese food and wine when it expanded the cellar to more than 400 selections. Now, along with *One Harbour Road* at the Grand Hyatt, it’s one of Hong Kong’s only Chinese-cuisine restaurants with an extensive wine program.

left: *Ming Court*; right: Steamed shrimp dumplings

I’ve come to Hong Kong for two back-to-back wine exhibitions, the Hong Kong International Wine & Spirits Fair and WineFuture HK, but the truth is, I’ve come for the food—or, more specifically, for the wine and the food. And I’ve begun to wonder why there aren’t more restaurants serving local cuisine with wine. Yu takes a break from pouring Masi Bianco around our table to offer an explanation.

“There’s the physical complication: Typically the food goes on the lazy suzy,” he says, giving the giant round in the center of the table a spin. “To get to the food, you have to jump over the glasses with your chopsticks.” It’s such a simple explanation it sounds silly—until I’m angling for another bite of squid and someone at the opposite side of the table spins the dish away. For agile food poaching, squat teacups make far more sense.

Then, he adds, there’s the sheer number of tastes: While his restaurant might send food out in courses, grouped with wine in mind, at a casual place dishes land as they are ready. This makes choosing a wine as challenging as it is at Thanksgiving: It’s impossible to pick a wine that will go with everything. His advice: “Order wine first. Taste the wine,



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—ZACHARY YU

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as if the dish and wine start having a conversation—about chickens, about eggs, about the sea. It becomes hard to eat anything else, in fact: I just want to keep listening.

It occurs to me that riesling isn’t necessarily a bad choice; it is just a very Western choice.

DINING AT THE HIGH-END IN HONG KONG

is a good way to go broke quickly, so later I canvass the locals for everyday places with wine lists. Noone has suggestions for places specializing in Cantonese cuisine, though. “Pairing Chinese food with wine is still a fairly new idea in Hong Kong,” says Dorothy So, who follows the HK food-and-wine scene avidly for *TimeOut Hong Kong*. “It wasn’t until about 2009 that Chinese restaurants started to offer wine-pairing menus. For the most part though, this trend has only occurred in the higher-end Chinese restaurants.”

And when it comes to the local noodle shops and *dai pai dong*—the outdoor food stalls—“we just don’t think of cracking open a bottle of wine. After all, for a lot of people, it hardly makes sense to spend HK\$30 [about US\$5] on a bowl of noodles and \$300 [\$38] on the bottle of wine to go along with it.” But, she adds, no one would frown on it if you did, and

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Easier said than done. To help his staff navigate pairings, Yu designed an electronic wine list, filling it with suggested dishes for each of the selections in his cellar. He lets me take it for a spin, and I quickly discover that, in his world, pinot gris takes precedence over riesling, my go-to for foods like steamed shrimp dumplings and salt-and-pepper squid.

“In our cuisine, there is no citrus, no acid; the signature is the texture,” Yu explains. “So you don’t want anything that’s very high acid; it’s going to seem out of balance.” The

Masi proves his point: It’s smooth and quiet, more a backdrop than a flavor component, and as such it doesn’t get in the way of anything, from the tender fresh bean curd to the suckling pig with skin so crisp it shatters. And the wine is, in fact, spectacular with a creamy cloud of egg whites folded around sweet pink shrimp. It’s



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— SIMON TAM



corkage tends to be little to nothing, sliding me a list of some of her favorite BYOs (see p. 19).

If you go it alone in Hong Kong, there are a couple books worth checking out before gathering up bottles and heading to a restaurant. The first is *108 Great Chinese Dishes Paired*, by Ch’ng Poh Tiong, a lawyer and publisher of *The Wine Review*, a quarterly magazine. Ch’ng also launched the International Congress on Chinese Cuisine and Wine in 2008, an event dedicated to exploring wine pairing in the context of Chinese food; the fourth congress is scheduled for 2013, in Guangzhou. In his book, he limits himself to one dish for each of the heroes in “Water Margin,” a Chinese classic written in the 12th or 13th century—and suggests wines to go with it.

The details on the wine pairings are minimal, but the background on the food is invaluable, particularly for a Westerner who might miss the importance of, say, the *wok hei* (“the heat and energy of the wok”) that adds a “smoldering quality” to a simple dish



Ch’ng Poh Tiong

of wide rice noodles tossed with Chinese broccoli, or the sweet potato flour that coats the meat in Hakka Steamed Pork, giving it extra body and texture—both elements pulling their dishes into red wine territory.

Ch’ng believes that Cantonese cuisine, as one of the most refined in all of China, is easy to pair with wine, but he warns against high-acid whites. “They don’t actually go with seafoods that possess too much iodine or are too rich in Omega 3,” he notes in an email exchange. “What happens then is that the wine bounces off the seafood. So, for example, stir-fried scallops, sea whelk and codfish—fatty and oily—make high-acid whites taste metallic or ‘fishy.’” Instead, like Yu at *Ming Court*, Ch’ng finds the most successful pairings happen with round, fleshy whites—or, he adds, “an evolved Champagne where the acidity has calmed down and it has become more winy.”

As for red wine with Cantonese dishes, he finds no problems as long as the tannins are mellow: “If the tannins are angry, violent and unresolved, never mind Chinese food; even the French wouldn’t like it. A Bordeaux cru classé of the 2005 vintage would be wasted with Cantonese roast goose or *confit de canard*.” Older vintages are one possibility, or young reds with light tannins, like pinot noir or gamay. “Just make sure the tannins are tamed, silky or velvety,” he says.

Jeannie Cho Lee, MW, a Hong Kong transplant from Korea, has also written extensively on the workings of Asian food and wine. In *Asian Palate*, Cho Lee considers the cuisines of ten major Asian cities, highlighting the cultural influences on the local approach to wine and spirits. I caught up with Cho Lee at WineFuture HK, where she was scheduled to speak on the idiosyncrasies of Asian food and wine pairing.

“I always approach wine through the cuisine of each city,” she says. “What is the bev-

erage culture? Tea. Warm, tannic, drunk without milk, sugar or lemon. What’s the closest beverage to that? Something that’s not cold, that’s tannic, that’s associated with being good for the digestion and good for health: That’s red wine.”

Red wine has other advantages in China, she adds, from the color, which is considered auspicious, to semantics: the Chinese word for fermented alcohol suggests that it is red; an extra word is needed to clarify when it is white.

With Cantonese cuisine, in particular, she notes an umami influence from the rich stocks that form the base of many dishes, as well as the slow-cooked sauces; like Ch’ng, she also brings up the effect of wok hei, the particular flavor and texture food takes on when it’s stir-fried in a searing wok. The addition of soy or oyster sauces or salted black beans up the umami as well. These can take dishes like steamed fish or stir-fried shrimp into a red-wine world.

CONSIDERED IN THIS LIGHT, the burgeoning auction market for older vintages of first-growth Bordeaux has its own logic with Cantonese cuisine.

Simon Tam, Christie’s head of auctions for Asia, suggests the local fondness for high-end Bordeaux goes beyond fashion and status: There’s also a genuine fondness for the flavors—the earthiness, the tannins, the gentle fruit of older wines. In *Flavour Colours*, the iPhone/iPad app he’s developed, there’s a litany of dishes to match Lafite, from fried rice noodles with clams to clay pot rice and Kung Pao shrimp.

“I came up with this app because I eat more Chinese food than Western, and I always drink wine,” Tam told me. “I figured there must be other people like me. And in thinking about Chinese food, I realized that it’s not as simple



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as red with red meat; white with fish. It’s more about how the meat is cooked, and about seasonality—how we eat, how we dress, how can we represent the four seasons.”

So rather than basing the app on direct flavor matches, he groups wines and foods by color: blond, ivory, tan and brown. “Blond is spring, fresh, a cool breeze, a squeeze of lemon,” he says animatedly, as if he’s just taken a deep breath of invigorating fresh air. “Ivory is warmer, the summer sun, white Burgundy or pinot gris; tan is a cool autumn day; we need a jacket. Brown is an evening by the fireplace, or the sort of dishes we turn to for comfort.”

Such a synesthetic approach to wine is decidedly not Western; we tend to prefer concrete terms, like flavor descriptors. Often these are baffling to Chinese consumers, he points out: Beyond the unfamiliarity with some Western foods, the Chinese are more likely to describe a dish holistically, using a combination of words to describe it, rather than to break it into its component parts.

“Our ancestors figured out that chicken can be blond, ivory or tan, but it can rarely be brown,” Tam continues; the meat is simply too delicate in flavor to reach that far. “Pork belly can be ivory, tan or brown, but it can never be blond.” Its fattiness assures it will

never be a light, refreshing dish; the most successful preparations make the most of its richness and texture. Applying the same strategy to food, a sharp riesling makes little sense with suckling pig. Better to go ivory, with a grand cru Chablis, a rosé of mourvedre or a pinot noir from Central Otago. Chicken with Sichuan chile? This is a warming dish, ready for Léoville-Las-Cases or a mellow Tuscan red.

TAM’S COMMENTS REMINDED ME of a dinner with Chinese friends in the States several years ago. Lihua and his wife had gone all-out to prepare dishes from their home region, an array of foods tingling with Sichuan peppercorn spice. I’d brought some top German and Australian rieslings, but a few dishes in, Lihua went to the kitchen and came back with a bottle. “I wonder if you’d mind trying some of the wine that we really like to have with this food,” he said, offering some red Riunite. I accepted with the best smile I could muster, and then laughed a few minutes later at my foolishness. Lightly sweet and very fruity, with no tannin or acid to speak of, the wine was ten times better with the food than my high-acid, mineral-laden picks.

Though it may not be intuitive for a Westerner, the rise of red in the East is no mistake. ■

BYOB COURTESY

In general, everyday Hong Kong restaurants are very open to people bringing their own wine, says Simon Tam, but he offers a few tips to ensure things go smoothly:

“If the Chinese restaurant does not sell wine, then the best you can hope for is a water glass and a tea pot for decanting, but you don’t have to feel guilty nor offer any gratuity.

“If the restaurant has a wine list but you can’t find anything entertaining, then ask how much they charge for corkage; it would generally be a small amount. But I would tell them that I’ll order lobster and other seafood, which are expensive, and would they consider dropping the small amount of corkage? They usually say yes. (Otherwise I still order the lobster and crab, pay the corkage but, depending on how good the food is, may or may not go back...)”

WHERE TO BYOB IN HONG KONG

Dorothy So, *TimeOut Hong Kong*

Tak Lung
25-27 Hong Keung St., San Po Kong,
852-2320-7020

“Old-style Cantonese cuisine with a focus on roasted meats. The “gold coin chicken”—which contains no gold, coin nor chicken—is a must-try.”

“Cantonese food, with especially good roast meats”

Xin Dau Ji
G/F & 1/F, Place 18,
18 Cheong Lok St.,
Jordan, 852-2388-6020

“It’s not Chinese food, but it’s a fantastically local environment. You carve your steak while some guy in a white vest slurps wonton noodles at the table behind you.”

ABC Kitchen

Shop 7, Food Market, 1 Queen St., Sheung Wan,
852-9278-8227

Simon Tam, *Christie’s Asia*

There is no stemware but plenty of old-fashioned teapots for decanting your favorite red. It is a nostalgic piece of HK and the food is as wholesome and hearty as ever, with an original cast of staff.

Lin Heung Tea House
160-164
Wellington St., Central;
852-2544-4556

A place for those in the know, with a range of tasty dishes almost too large and too good to come out of their tiny kitchen.

Ngau Kee Food Café
3 Gough St., Central; 852-2546-2584/2545-5557

Pang’s Kitchen: Small and intimate, with a lot of Cantonese classic dishes.
25 Yik Yam St., Happy Valley; 852-2838-5462
You must book, and bring your own corkscrew.

Jeannie Cho Lee, *MW*

Excellent seafood; plastic chairs but real wine glasses.

Rainbow Seafood Restaurant
23-25 First St., Sok Kwu Wan, Lamma Island;
852-2982-8100; rainbowrest.com.hk

Private kitchen serving organic Cantonese food; HK\$100 corkage/bottle

Yin Yang
18 Ship St., Wan Chai;
852-2866-0868

Gong Guan
12th fl, Fung Woo Building,
279 Des Voeux Rd.,
Central, Sheung Wan;
852-2577-9789,
gong-guan.com

Speakeasy-style kitchen serving Cantonese food; HK\$100 corkage/bottle

Private kitchen; innovative East-meets-West cuisine; HK\$250 corkage/bottle

Ta Pantry
Flat C, Moonstar Ct., 2D Star St., Wan Chai;
852-2521-8121/852-9403-6430,
tapantry.wordpress.com