

Rendezvous with a good time



Nelson Aromatics Symposium luncheon

Increasing your knowledge about wine is an ongoing meeting of good food, interesting people and culture, writes Curtis Marsh.

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With ever-increasing wine consumption, there is an equal desire in many to become articulate and confident on the subject. I am frequently asked: "How and where can I learn more about wine?" Typical of Hong Kong's impatient pace, this invariably precludes gradual enlightenment; the expectation is to be instantly conversant and credentialed on the subject. At this point I use the adage: "The more you know about wine, the more you realize how little you know." Wine appreciation should not be treated as an exam, rather as an ongoing cultivation of discovery and enjoyment.

Having an understanding of the basics of wine is certainly invaluable. Not only are you better equipped to grasp the intricacies of wine, it will provide the platform to explore further with more confidence and direction.

I can highly recommend the courses developed by talented wine industry professional Simon Tam at The International Wine Centre (IWC). IWC has offices in Hong Kong and Shanghai offering courses at all levels, from an introductory program through to advanced exploration of the world's wine regions. There is also a pragmatic wine summary course, including wine protocol in restaurants and food pairing with flexible programs on weekends for the busy professional.

More importantly, the IWC curriculum is focused on tasting wines - rather than a surfeit of theory - and designed to equip you with the necessary skills to forge ahead independently. All the tutors are bilingual, so courses can be conducted in Chinese or English. For more details, www.iwinecentre.com.

Should you already be comfortable with your level of wine appreciation but yearning to discover more, then I suggest attending wine events or symposiums, especially if they are held in vineyard regions.

There is a misconception that such wine events are only befitting wine industry professionals or schooled connoisseurs. To the contrary, one's level of wine knowledge is inconsequential in these largely informal (usually festive) and interactive celebrations. Besides, everyone is there with a common goal, to learn more about the region or varietal theme, and have a good time.

Above all, these type of events amalgamate the supplementary benefits of enjoying wine encompassing travel, culture, history, art and certainly food. Moreover, this decidedly social environment could have you serendipitously seated next to a winemaker or restaurateur who could divulge crucial and timely advice on the best places to eat and visit. On that note, always plan your trip with the wine event at the beginning to allow sufficient free time, supplementary to any prearranged itinerary, to take advantage of contacts and information ascertained.

The aromatics symposium I attended on a long weekend recently in Nelson, New Zealand, is a perfect example of combining festivities with learning an enormous amount about riesling and pinot gris. Between sumptuous feasts of excellent local produce, we tasted through comprehensive line-ups from top producers around the world, including rieslings from Jeffrey Grosset (Clare Valley) Domaine Zind-Humbrecht (Alsace) Weingut Hirsch (Austria) Peter Jakob (Rheingau) and Dr Loosen (Mosel).



From the left, riesling producers Hätsch Kalberer (Fromm), Blair Walters (Felton Road), Jeffrey Grosset and Verdi, Hätsch's 1962 Mercedes-Benz.

The opportunity to try such an inspiring line-up of rieslings rarely occurs outside of this type of event. Even more enlightening was the New Zealand riesling contingent, clearly impressing the international participants with the similarities in quality and style to Germany and Austria.

The overall impression of the New Zealand wines was consistently pronounced levels of natural tartaric acid that, while crucial to riesling's makeup, patently requires a degree of residual sugar to balance, even tame the acidity. Measured in grams per liter (g/l), acidities average between eight and 10 g/l. That's similar, if not higher, than the coolest regions of Germany, so the logic of following the Mosel style should prevail.

New Zealand's southern extremity ensures long, cool-dry autumn ripening conditions, well suited to the extra hang-time that late-harvest riesling requires. After climate, the geology of New Zealand is equally suited to riesling with a predominance of alluvial soils, ancient riverbeds and gravelly terraces formed by receding glaciers and seas, providing vital minerals and excellent drainage. There is a common thread of mountain-fresh, wet river pebbles and gravelly qualities in many of the wines.

Below are my notes on the New Zealand line-up: I have detailed the alcohol levels, which are noticeably low in correlation to the high residual sugars (RS), indicated also as g/l.

Dry River Craighall Riesling 2005, Martinborough (22-year-old unirrigated vines in deep free-draining gravels). Perfume of peach, fresh pineapple, golden delicious apple among sweet custard, white honey and background of lime. Creamy powerful, lime-driven palate entry building toward a mandarin-like juiciness with mouth-watering freshness and a tingly-spicy fresh-ginger warmth. Very long with excellent acidity among wet stone characters, deceptively drier than the nose suggests, helped by a chalky phenolic grip. 11.5 percent alcohol, dry (vineyard direct www.dryriver.co.nz or British agent Justerini and Brooks www.justerinis.com).

Neudorf Riesling 2005, Brightwater, Nelson (eight-year-old vines in light, free-draining, stony alluvial soils). First impression, sweet and floral, as if walking in to a florist shop and smelling white roses. Lurking behind are limes and a hint of ginger and cinnamon spice. Nicely textured with stone-fruit flavors. Finishes relatively dry, aided by a vibrant citrus acid-backbone and gravelly notes. 12.2 percent alcohol, RS 6.9 g/l (from www.boutiquewines.com.hk; www.neudorf.co.nz). In Singapore, The Cellar Door; www.thecellardoor.com.sg).



Pegasus Bay Riesling 2005

Waipara, North Canterbury (20-year-old vines planted in light, free-draining alluvial soils).

Sweet palm-sugar nose, intense perfume of apricots and peaches with tropical hints of ripe pineapple and limes. Viscous palate entry with poached stone-fruit syrupiness, counterbalanced by exhilarating acidity and an intense build-up of apricot and piquant lime; long powerful ginger spice and anise glow coupled with cobalt acidity camouflage the high residual sugar superbly; my personal favorite of the line-up and equal to top-class late-harvest styles from the Rheingau or Wachau. 10.8 percent alcohol, RS 45 g/l (available www.boutiquewines.com.hk; www.pegasusbay.com).

Felton Road Riesling Block 1, Bannockburn, Central Otago (15-year-old vines planted on a steep slope of loess over free-draining silt and schist gravels). Yeasty, funky nuances amongst zesty squeezed lemons, fresh cut granny smith apple, mountain stream mineral freshness and prominent nettle-like, cold-steely acidity. Creamy soft textured entry to palate quickly building in concentration, indeed the essence of succulent golden peaches and ripe orange juiciness fill the mouth, chased by piercing pineapple acidity (a breathtaking 10.4 g/l) with pickled ginger warm glow among cold slate and excellent phenolic grip; the most idiosyncratic of the line-up. 8.5 percent alcohol, RS 67 g/l (available www.watsonswine.com; www.feltonroad.com).

In Singapore, The Cellar Door; www.thecellardoor.com.sg).

Fromm La Strada Riesling Auslese 2005, Marlborough (nine-year-old vines planted in an old river bed with layers of clay and free-draining alluvial gravel). Perfume of white honey, summer fields of clover and lavender, floral notes, ripe peaches, freshly torn mint leaves, an overall freshness and airiness similar to Mosel rieslings. Viscous palate entry with flavors of white peaches and ripe Anjou pear succumbing to the dominant sweetness and gossamer of white honey, balanced by poignant acidity; a subtle, elegant style that will benefit from cellaring. 8.5 percent alcohol, RS 91 g/l (available from Nathan Fine Wines info@nathanfinewines.com; www.frommwineries.com).

If all of this has you salivating for a glass of riesling and thirsty for knowledge, there is a riesling seminar being held in Seattle and the Washington states Columbia Valley, at Chateau Ste Michelle Winery, June 25-27. Moderated by the highly entertaining riesling authority Stuart Pigott, with guest speakers Ernst Loosen, Kathrina Plum, Bob Bertheau, among others, Riesling Rendezvous is an excellent opportunity to explore the style through the world's greatest producers. Visit www.rieslingrendezvous.com.

See you there.



Matt Donaldson (left), winemaker at Pegasus Bay and celebrated British wine writer and commentator Oz Clarke

"Curtis Marsh, a veteran wine importer and sommelier, is an Asia-based writer on wine, food and travel."

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