

# WHO'S WHO IN HONG KONG

Like India and Singapore, the subject of our Who's Who in the coming issue, Hong Kong's wine trade business was developed by British colonials and expatriates from a wide range of other countries. This picture has changed radically since the handover to China, notes Robby Nimmo, and continues to change almost daily.

**N**ot surprisingly, a fair number of Chinese families in Hong Kong are descendents of refugees who fled the mainland in 1949. Many of these younger Hong Kong Chinese consumers have been educated overseas in Britain, the States, Canada and Australia - and returned with new tastes. Likewise, older Hong Kong businessmen have had their attention redirected from Cognac to wine by health, the model set by wine-drinking overseas business contacts and by the evident sophistication that wine can confer.

Hong Kong is, of course, also the doorway to China. Mainland-based businessmen make their vinous discoveries here, which means that success in Hong Kong can influence sales in Shanghai.

Another transformation is the shift from the on-trade to drinking wine at home, which has been promoted by the efforts of two big retail chains, Park N Shop and Wellcome, and given an even bigger boost by the halving of excise duty on wine in February of this year.

For this Who's Who, 500 members of the Hong Kong wine trade were asked to name the people and companies they thought were the most important players in their market. A fuller version of this poll can be found online at [www.wine-business-international.com](http://www.wine-business-international.com) and a specially commissioned report on the Hong Kong wine market is available on our website at \$250.

## 1. Best Retailer

While many voters felt that Hong Kong lacked a wide variety of retailers, and that the best often double as wholesalers, the names of several specialists often came up. Among these were Berry Bros and Rudd, Remy, Ponti, Maxxium, Altaya, Gallerie du Vin and

Fine and Rare Wines. City Super, "a compact store filled with a good selection" and offering "a professional approach," also had a number of fans, as did three Italian specialists Il Bel Paese, Castello de Vino and Valvidia.

There was support, too, for Hong Kong's two main supermarket chains, Park N Shop and Wellcome, which each own around 250 stores. Interestingly, the winner, Watson's Wine Cellar, and runner-up, Oliver's, are specialist outlets associated with this pair of giants.

Watson's Wine Cellar is part of Hutchinson Whampoa, which also owns Park N Shop. Launched in 1998, it now has 13 shops in Hong Kong and a range of 2,000 wines. Voters said that the number of Watson's stores made them convenient to all of Hong Kong and that they had something for high-net worth collectors and every-day wine drinkers alike. In store promotions and their loyalty club were also noted favourably.

The runner-up, Oliver's, opened in 1981 and takes the form of an exclusive store in the Princes Building in Central Hong Kong. Oliver's was praised for knowledgeable staff, a good selection of wine and spirits, good specials and a readiness to source rare wines for customers.

## 2. Best Hotel Group

Since the Peninsula Hotel opened its doors in 1928, five-star hotels in Hong Kong have been at the heart of fine dining. Recently, there have been several new openings and a re-opening that have raised standards even further. The hotels that received significant numbers of votes included the Four Seasons, the Landmark Mandarin Hotel, which is notable for its wireless, hand held electronic wine lists, and Island Shangri-La's flagship restaurant, Petrus.

While it was the Mandarin Oriental that won highest marks for "the thought and care taken over the wines, with the guest in mind", the runner-up, the Grand Hyatt, was also said to have an "outstanding wine list with WSET trained waiters," and a "consistent wine by the glass programme."

## 3. Best Wholesaler

No fewer than 28 companies received serious support. Most notable were Jebesen, Maxxium, Fine Vintage, Vins de France, Hennessy Diageo, (formerly Riche Monde), Links Concepts ("Dynamic and keen."), Telford International, Wine Culture, Ponti, Connoisseur wines, Force 8 and Altaya. The joint winners, however, were Watson's, whose "wholesale team is passionate about people, wine and food" and Northeast with its "superb, immediate personal service and excellent wine selection.". Kedington, the importer of Billecart-Salmon, Shaw & Smith and Santa Rita was rewarded with the runner-up prize for its "consistency, range and price."

## 4. Best Specialist Importer

Among the 20 companies nominated were Golden Gate Wine Company (for USA), Links Concepts (for Chile); Kedington Wines and Il Bel Paese, MHD and Topsy Trading for their focus on Australian, Italian wines, Champagne and Bordeaux respectively. Votes also went to Farr Vintners, Platinum Wines, Rare and Fine Wines, Connoisseur Wines and, particularly, Berry Bros & Rudd. The real battle, however, was between two companies, North East Wines and Altaya, with the prize finally going to Lillian Haynes's North East. Ms Haynes launched her business in 1993, focusing on New Zealand at a time, she says

“when many hotel and restaurant staff didn’t know where New Zealand was, much less that it made wine”. Today, North East also sells wines from France (Lanson Champagne), California (Gallo), Chile, Argentina, South Africa and Spain. Voters referred to the way Ms Haynes “knows how to establish a brand” and to the “superb, immediate personal service and excellent wine selection.”

Runner-up Paulo Pong’s Altaya Wines, was established only in 2001 and focuses on fine and rare Bordeaux, Burgundy, Rhone, Tuscany and Californian wines for high net worth private individuals, 5-star hotels, top independent restaurant groups and private clubs.

### 5. Best Wine Consultant

A category that is relatively new for Asia, but increasingly important as the market grows in volume and sophistication. The winner, Simon Tam, was born into a Chinese restaurant family in Adelaide, where he studied oenology before heading to Hong Kong in 1994 to work as a wine consultant. He was also chairman of the Wine Institute of Asia, where he helped to launch the Hong Kong International Wine Challenge. More recently, he has become a columnist and has established the International Wine Centre, which offers wine education in both Hong Kong and Shanghai. As one voter said, “Probably the only non-importer who provides trade advice professionally.” Wine Business International contributor and aspiring MW, Jeannie Cho Lee, was a close runner-up, being described as a “rising star” with an impressive “range of contacts, palate and understanding of the market”.

### 6. Best Local Wine Publication

While one voter said that, “these days, there’s more about wine in Hong Kong’s Chinese newspapers than the two produced in English here”, the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong’s main English newspaper, was praised for good wine coverage on Thursdays and weekends. However, there was general agreement that the Chinese-language Wine Now offered the best regular wine reading in Hong Kong. The publication,

which has an audited print run of 20,000, was launched in January 1998 by Lau Chi Su, who was also nominated as Best Consultant and Most Influential Person in the Hong Kong Wine Industry. Wine Now was said to have a “good team” and to have worked hard on “the development of wine in Hong Kong.”

### 7. Best Wine Journalist

Hong Kong is a village, and many rely on the word of mouth as the best village voice. Reading local articles is seen an adjunct. Among the nominated writers were Simon Tam, Kevin Sinclair and Annabel Jackson for their contributions to the South China Morning Post, along with The Hong Kong Standard newspaper’s Curtis Marsh and freelancers Maggie Beale and Simon Vine. Another nominee was Robby Nimmo, who compiled this survey, praised for her coverage of New Zealand wines.

The joint winners, however, were Lau Chi Sun and Debra Meiburg. Of Lau Chi Sun, editor of the Chinese-language Wine Now, was said that “even though he does not write bilingually, he has raised the level of wine knowledge enormously.” American Debra Meiburg was noted for “her approach, that simplifies rather than baffles, and her humour.” Runner-up, Jeannie Cho Lee, was praised for “her tenacity and work ethic as well as superb palate.” She contributes to Wine Spectator, the World of Fine Wine and Harpers as well as Wine Business International and Cathay Pacific’s magazine.

### 8. Most Influential Wine Person

As one voter said, “in a competitive market with 200-300 distributors, no one has an especially strong presence.” Among the local nominees were importer and “Godfather” David Webster, Lau Chi Sun “for his excellent palate” and Simon Tam (see “Best Consultant”). Votes for overseas figures also went to Steven Spurrier of Decanter, James Suckling of the Wine Spectator and Robert Joseph of Wine Business International “for his knowledge of the Hong Kong Wine Trade”. The clear winner, however, was Robert Parker. “Local people believe in his comments and ratings”.

### QUOTE UNQUOTE

» With good service, North East knows how to establish a brand. «



Lilian Haynes, North East

Henry Tsang Ying-yen, the man who, as Chief Financial Secretary, halved Hong Kong’s wine duty this year, was as interesting a runner-up (as one comment said, “Of course, at the end of the day, this town is all about money!”) as was Jancis Robinson MW, whose frequent visits for the FT were noted.

### 9. Best Wine Competition

Hong Kong has two major wine competitions of its own: the annual WINPAC, which is run annually, and the Hong Kong International Wine Challenge. The ultimate winner in this close contest was WINPAC, whose name stands for “Wines of the Pacific Rim”, a geographic designation that was extended to include South Africa. Launched in 1994 by Sir Noel Power, an Australian-born judge who acted as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Hong Kong during the handover in 1997, the competition is notable for the fame of the judges it invites. In 2007, these included Sam Neill from New Zealand, Gina Gallo from California and Peter Lehmann from Australia. Other associated events include a Master Class, a pro-am tasting challenge and a Vintner’s dinner at which consumers can sample winning wines.

Whilst WINPAC is perceived as the most comprehensive competition for New World wines, the Hong Kong International Wine Challenge, which attracts around 1,000 wines from across the globe won praise for its “non-biased inclination”. Chaired by Robert Joseph, the competition uses overseas and local judges, including Simon Tam, Debra Meiburg and Jeannie Cho Lee, who also participate in WINPAC. ■