

WHO'S WHO IN SINGAPORE

For a country with a population of only 4.5 million, Singapore doesn't seem a likely place to sell high volumes. And yet it is a country that plays host to some of the most iconic wine events in the region, observes Jenny Tan. She takes a closer look at who is most influential in this important market.

The wine scene in Singapore has not always been as vibrant as it is today. The country may have British roots, but wine drinking was traditionally the province of the well-heeled and the upper-class, but not ingrained in the daily life of the majority of the population. Beer and spirits were, in fact, more popular drinks. Twenty years ago, it was only the hotels that boasted decent wine lists – and those were predominantly French wines.

The last ten years have proven to be revolutionary, and part of the change is a by-product of the surge in Australian wines. The fruit-forward styles, without the puckering tannins that people usually associate with French wines, coupled with consumer friendly prices, mean that the middle-class can now easily afford a bottle of wine. As Australia is just a few hours away by plane, Singaporeans have also started travelling to visit the wineries, an experience that usually means better brand recall.

This wine drinking culture is further buoyed by the rise of Generation X, who studied overseas and were eager to bring their wine drinking habits back home. From an initially paltry number, there are now more than 200 active wine distributors in Singapore alone. The number is probably higher than this, since having a wine distribution business on the side has become a hobby for some of the wealthier wine drinkers.

On the whole, Singaporeans tend to drink well and are more likely than not to avoid, for lack of the better word, plonk. This is partly due to the taxation system, which goes by a flat rate, instead of by the percentage of value.

For every 75cl bottle of wine, the tax is S\$7.125 (€3.44). This naturally means that it makes more sense to buy a medium to high quality bottle of wine than a cheap one. This is also one of the reasons why a significant percentage of the regular wine buyers of *en primeur* or top French wines in Singapore are not locals, but visitors from the neighbouring countries who come here because the market promises better prices.

With the coming of two new mega integrated resorts, the future of the wine scene in Singapore looks brighter than ever before.

The Wine Business International survey of readers has uncovered the most influential people and institutions in the increasingly dynamic Singapore market. The results are below.

1. Best supermarket retailer

The term 'supermarket wine' in Singapore is often used to refer to cheap quaffing wines. The supermarket used to be the place where you found familiar mass-market wines from players who had sunk massive advertising dollars into their promotion. This has changed slightly over the last few years, and wine action has picked up a little. For example, several major supermarkets, but mainly Cold Storage and FairPrice, have both launched their own wine clubs, to build a community of wine drinkers and create more wine knowledge. Carrefour's arrival on the supermarket scene, with their regular sales and friendly prices, has also generated more interest in the wines, despite their emphasis on French wines.

The vote on which was the best supermarket retailer was virtually

unanimous. The winner? Jason's Wine Cellar, a part of the Cold Storage group (www.coldstorage.com). Born in 1975, the aim of the concept was to offer imported gourmet products to the locals. There are now four Jason's Wine Cellars in Singapore, usually part of a supermarket run by the Cold Storage group. Here you can find up to 10,000 labels to choose from, ranging from your everyday S\$20 (€9.65) bottle of wine, to a comprehensive list of the first growths, including Chateau Lafite and Pétrus.

2. Best wine list in a restaurant

Hotel and restaurant wine lists in Singapore have become a different kind of animal in recent years, thanks in large part to ever more establishments passing hefty 'listing fees' on to wine importers. It can cost as much as S\$20,000 (€9,650) for one product to be listed as a house wine, which effectively, of course, leaves room only for the big players.

Les Amis gathered the most votes in this category. The restaurant has been *the* French fine-dining institution since the day it opened, 15 March 1994. In a volatile industry where restaurants tend to drop like flies, it says a lot that it has survived until now. Long before restaurants paid any heed to wine lists, the team of sommeliers here has been building up a stellar list, which now stands at 1,200 wine labels. It has won the Wine Spectator Gold Award for the last ten years consecutively – a feat that only three restaurants in Asia, and only one in Singapore, can boast of.

3. Best Sommelier

For the longest time, local diners

AWARD WINNER

»» The sommelier behind the rise of good wine service in Singapore. ««



Randy See, best sommelier

assumed that the waiters who served wines were sommeliers. Due to the lack of formal training, and until the recent Court of Master Sommelier certification was made available in Singapore, there were very few qualified and experienced sommeliers. Further, the lack of a defined career path has prompted many promising sommeliers to instead become wine distributors with, to boot, a fatter pay cheque. The bulk of the qualified sommeliers today usually come either from Les Amis, which provides good training, or Raffles Grill. In the past few years, the young talents from the Michaelangelo group of restaurants and Saint Pierre have also joined the scene.

Randy See was given the highest marks in our survey. He's known for running his sommelier team with an iron fist - woe to the assistant sommelier who is not a team player! - which is why guests know they will receive a quality wine recommendation when dining at Les Amis. See started at Les Amis as a waiter and steadily rose through the ranks. He is currently pursuing the second level of the Court of Master Sommelier in London and is in charge of all the wine lists in the Les Amis group of restaurants.

4. Best wine importer

There are many 'wine importers' in Singapore. At one end, there are the representative offices such as Moët-Hennessy-Diageo, which provide the trade with massive promotional support; at the other end of the wine importing chain there is an increasing trend for well-to-do wine lovers, usually with a full time job not associated with wine, to apply for a license so

that they can try their hand at importing wine. Not surprisingly, not many of these succeed.

That top honours went to Culina (www.culina.com.sg) came as a surprise, because it is not one of the 'big boys' who can support the trade with advertising or promotional funds. But their belief in growing with their partners has stood them in good stead. With 54 brands in their portfolio (most of which, such as Laurent Perrier and Torres, are family-owned), they are known for investing in product training and customer wine dinners. Although 95% of their business is on-trade, they currently have 3 retail shops that cater to private customers.

5. Best wine retailer

As selection is still limited, there is still a lot of room for quality growth among the wine shops in Singapore. The recent appearance of the Malaysian-based Denise wine shops may change that in a few years time. However, as the selection of Bacchus in our survey proves, there already are a number of excellent locations.

Bacchus wine shop is almost an institution, and so is its 56-year-old owner, Don Tay, who started the shop in 1991, the first of its kind in Singapore. Getting through the cramped shop needs some careful navigation, but this is the one-stop shop for all of your wine desires, whether it is Harlan Estate, Le Pin or Romanée-Conti - or just a bottle of Jacob's Creek. In the last two years, Tay has gone on an expansion strategy, with a wine bar (forget the wine list, customers just walk into the cellar, pull out a bottle and then check the price) at the beautiful Fullerton Boathouse and two more shops in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

6. Best wine journalist

Although wine is an increasingly popular topic in Singapore, wine articles are usually found only in food magazines or lifestyle publications. Today, there is still only one serious wine publication in Singapore. It was thus no surprise that Ch'ng Poh Tiong,

AWARD WINNER

»» An influential wine writer and organiser of major tastings and events. ««



Dr NK Yong, most influential personality

one of the few veteran wine writers in Singapore, was the journalist of choice among those who responded to our survey. A lawyer by training, he started Singapore's first and only wine publication, The Wine Review, in 1991, and later went on to publish the first annual guide to Bordeaux in Chinese. He also writes a quarterly column for Decanter magazine.

7. Most influential wine personality

The poll for both 'Best Wine Journalist' and 'Most Influential Personality' resulted in a near tie between two names: Ch'ng Poh Tiong and Dr N K Yong, with the latter collecting a few more votes in this final category. It says a lot about Dr N K Yong that 62 wine producers - all of whom were top names from around the world - came together in Singapore this February to celebrate his 80th birthday. It also says a lot that, together with wife Melina, he turned his own birthday celebration into a charity event. It raised more than S\$800,000 (€386,000) for three adopted charities from the winemakers' generous contributions, including a 1961 Chateau Figeac that raised S\$45,000 (€21,700). Dr N K Yong, who was one of the most renowned heart surgeons in Singapore until his retirement in 2004, has shared his wine knowledge through his column in the business newspaper, Business Times, and wine tastings and events. He was awarded the *Officier de l'Ordre National du Mérite* in 2004 by the French Government for his contribution to the French wine industry in Singapore. Dr N K Yong also organised the first Bordeaux 2000 tasting in Asia in 2003, as well the *Paulee de Singapour* in 2005. ■