

## What's in a name?

28 Feb 2009 by Nick Lander/ FT

Cépage finally opened in Hong Kong on Wednesday 18 Feb, as designated by a feng shui master, to the disparate sounds of a lion dance and of corks being pulled on bottles of top white burgundy and mature red bordeaux.

The latter are the trademarks of Les Amis group, which runs 12 restaurants in Singapore and for whom this is its first foreign foray. The curse of the number 13 combined with the two words that make up their name may have contributed, however, to make this opening far more painful and expensive than anticipated.

Choosing a restaurant's name - one of the 10 key factors in its eventual success, I believe - is far more difficult than anyone outside the business can imagine. And past experience seems to be no key to getting it right. In London, Chris Corbin and Jeremy King had similar difficulties when planning a second restaurant after their highly successful Wolseley, before ultimately settling on St Alban. Randy See and Raymond Lim (pictured here), who run Les Amis for its three directors, had just a week to find a new name for their Hong Kong restaurant. They had already finished the conversion and hired all the staff. 'It was stressful', See admitted, albeit now with a smile.



See, the group's Operations Director and a Cantonese speaker, had been planning a venture into Hong Kong for some time but sprang into action a year ago when the government abolished the duty on wine. As a newcomer able to import some of their extensive stock from Singapore effectively duty-free, his restaurant would, he realised, have a distinct price advantage over the other restaurants carrying more expensive stock that included the former duty.

A promising site quickly presented itself. Cépage is on the left hand side near the top of a narrow street on the borders of the Admiralty and Wanchai districts, next to the Pacific Place 3 redevelopment and within walking distance of the Shangri-La and Conrad hotels. Lim recognised two other advantages. 'Any customer can be dropped off right outside the door and then it's only two steps into the restaurant. There is no walking through a hotel lobby or shopping centre. And, on a rather more superstitious note, Les Amis in Singapore is located on the left hand side of the road, too.'

That the site was that of a former, failed restaurant did not make Lim and See less enthusiastic - nor did the fact that its layout can only be described as awkward. It is large, 7,500 sq ft in total, but spread over five floors so that its redesign has had to be intricately calculated to incorporate a bar, two temperature-controlled wine cellars, a kitchen on the fourth floor and a rooftop area for smokers. There is room for a maximum of only 55 customers.

On the hoarding that went up in September came the announcement that Les Amis, Singapore, would be opening in Hong Kong and they initiated the still very British process of applying for both a restaurant and a liquor licence, an operation that has to be published in two different newspapers. The plan was to open in mid-December.

With just a week to go, Lim and See were served with an injunction to prevent them using their name by the owners of Mes Amis, a bar/restaurant not that far away. Lawyers were immediately consulted and various options considered. There was a possibility of a financial settlement that would have allowed them to use the name but See considered this too expensive. 'I was advised that we had a reasonably good legal case but for as long as the suit ran, we couldn't trade, of course', See explained. 'The only viable solution was to change the name.'

A two-day brainstorming session ensued at the end of which the name Cépage, French for grape variety, emerged as the popular choice. But the whole licence application had to begin again and even on this second round, See explained with a sigh, there was an initial objection, although fortunately nothing materialised. Cépage served its first customers just before Christmas but was unable to sell any alcohol until the end of January.

Lim rattled off the extra costs that have ensued. 'In cash terms it is about £180,000, of which about a third are legal costs. The vast majority are extra operating costs from just having a full brigade and a finished restaurant not able to serve anybody.' The wine-besotted See added, 'Then there's the fact that while we were open and before the liquor license came through, I was giving quite a lot of wine away as that is, in my opinion, the only way people can really enjoy our food.'

Lim, See and their board now seem very happy with Cépage even if the obvious association with Singapore has been lost. See explained that the episode has taught him that it's what's in the name rather than the name itself that matters. To his customers it seems to have made no difference whatsoever.

If Hong Kong has provided See with this particular challenge, he has chosen to respond in a manner resonant of the city's long history as an entrepot, by bringing in the best from elsewhere to generate a sense of luxury.

While the service is formally French, albeit manned at high Asian levels that would promptly bankrupt any European or American restaurant, the chef Thomas Mayr is from the Dolomites in north-east Italy, itself the confluence of numerous culinary influences. And what he seems to be relishing is the considerably wider range of produce that is available here compared with Singapore.

This was highlighted in our first two courses. One was laid out in two deep troughs running down a large white plate in which the right hand side held pieces of Alaskan crab topped with Aquitaine caviar while in the other were small balls of avocado sitting on top of a pale green apple jelly. By contrast, there was a bowl of angel hair pasta tossed with small shrimps and coated in a chili paste called Nduja de Montepurro that is made in Sicily and was initially brought to Mayr's attention by one of his directors while visiting London's Borough Market. A main course of a thin slice of beef from Kagoshima province in Japan and a dessert that was Mayr's considerably lighter version of the Austrian Kaiserschmarren were other high points.

As important as any chef, See realised, was the right personality to sell his extraordinary cellar, particularly as he knew a local face would be vital. In John Chan he has secured a sommelier that Central Casting would have promptly rejected in that he is broad, bald and wears a most unlikely black, leather apron. But I have never seen a sommelier bustle around a dining room with such infectious enthusiasm.

Lim and See fully appreciate the trading challenges ahead, and admitted that the company has just been through a round of cost-cutting which has involved a drop in their own salaries. Cépage's less expensive four-course dinner menu is just under £60 per person but the restaurant is small, intimate (although the lighting could be better) and aiming for a level of subtlety not widely available in brash Hong Kong. Something its new name may just help them to achieve.

**Cépage**, 23 Wing Fung Street, Hong Kong +852.2861.3130

Closed Sunday. [www.lesamis.com.sg](http://www.lesamis.com.sg)