China's new connoisseurs

8 Sep 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT

It is generally agreed that the 2010 bordeaux campaign was mismanaged, but it would have been a disaster without the Chinese. Of the £30 million worth of baby bordeaux sold by London's leading fine wine trader Farr Vintners, 40% by value was sold by its Hong Kong office.

So the Chinese wine lover, for long discussed - and often dismissed as either a phantasm or someone who dilutes their Pétrus with Coke (a practice still occasionally encountered but on the wane) - is now a very powerful reality. But what is he, and in my experience very much she, like?

Of course no generalisation can be made about a nation of more than a billion palates, but I did meet an outstanding Chinese wine collector recently and he made one, about the Chinese worship of certain brands and names, not least red bordeaux in general and (until now - although see the Liv-ex index) Château Lafite in particular. 'The Chinese are like people just emerging from a long time in a dark cave. It is not surprising that they look up at the sky and try to find the brightest stars to guide themselves by.' This is an extremely well-dressed young man who, with his wife, buys first growths not by the case but by the barrel (enough to fill 25 cases) and has negotiated a special arrangement with at least one first growth to have their wine put into bottles decorated with a picture by their favourite Chinese artist. (And he is no fantasist who has told me a tall tale; I have seen his contacts book.)

His principal complaint about the legion of tastings and dinners that the Bordeaux château owners have been organising throughout China over the last few years in an attempt to drum up a following for their wine is: 'They don't serve old enough vintages at their events in China. The wines are mostly from this century! Are they serious or not?'

Do you read me, Pauillac? You need to dig deeper into your cellars.

I was even more fascinated a few days later to meet a group of senior Chinese investment bankers who had been invited to London for a week's training. I was asked to provide them with the wine tasting that was seen as suitable entertainment for their last afternoon. I nosed around my own cellar and took along three white wines (a Felton Road Chardonnay from New Zealand and a dry Riesling apiece from Australia and Germany), three Pinot Noirs (another offering from Felton Road, a red burgundy and a Californian from Marimar Torres) and three red bordeaux for something more familiar to them (a basic 2009 red bordeaux, a 2005 Haut-Médoc and a fully mature 1986 Château Mouton Baronne Philippe, in the hope that they might be impressed by this little cousin of Lafite Rothschild).

I'd say the average age of the group was about 30, the sexes were equally represented, and the men's clothes in particular were heavily branded. No chest was left unembroidered. They seemed to be keen tasters and much less keen spitters, even though the event took place straight after lunch. Although I persuaded them that we didn't need to toast each other with every mouthful, they were reluctant to pour leftovers away. Though at least I fared better than the manager at the Mandarin Oriental in Sanya, the southern Chinese resort. He organised quite a complex wine tasting for Chinese journalists, only to see the entire contents of all the bottles drained in one, all-encompassing *Gam bei* toasting session.'

At the end we had a vote about their favourite wines (I was determined that they should not ignore the white wine universe and made them choose a favourite white as well as a favourite red). And I insisted on not telling them the price of the wines - blessed Wine-searcher managed to produce a price for all of them in RMB except for the most basic bordeaux, Château Brassac 2009 - until they had voted. The prices, incidentally, varied from 105 RMB for the very toothsome Château St-Paul 2005 Haut-Médoc to a surprisingly low 672 RMB for the 1986 fifth growth, thereby illustrating how relatively underpriced red bordeaux is if it carries either an obscure name or a mature vintage - especially relative to the most recent vintages of the grand names. One pound is worth about 10 RMB.

They were not generally impressed by non-European offerings and liked the taste of the Rieslings, especially the Robert Weil Kiedrich Gräfenberg Ertses Gewächs 2005 Rheingau - but somehow I can't see that name catching on as a mega Chinese brand.

Among the reds, they admired the dryness of the young red burgundy, a Bourgogne Rouge 2008 from Domaine Coche-Dury, but the favourite of course was the wine that was very obviously the grandest and oldest, the fifth growth Pauillac from the Mouton stable that is now called Château d'Armailhac 1986 but was then named after Baron Philippe de Rothschild's late wife. 'Where can I buy this wine this afternoon?' asked one well-dressed young woman impatiently.

'Did you pay for these wines?' asked another young woman, a particularly keen sipper, peremptorily. She was certainly the most sceptical of the crowed and wanted to know, could I unfailingly identify a wine when served it blind? (You must be joking, mate, doesn't translate very well in to Mandarin.)

The woman who wanted to buy the 1986 Pauillac said to me, 'but Lafite is the best, right?' adding that she had recently had a Château Lafite but found that it seemed a bit tough - maybe it should have been decanted longer? I was rather impressed by someone who was daring to criticise a wine that currently sells for the equivalent of many hundreds of pounds a bottle, but further investigation revealed that she was referring to the basic bordeaux that the Lafite management cleverly market in China as Légende de Lafite, the equivalent of our Château Brassac 2009 that can be found in the UK market for around £7 a bottle. But in China, with the name Lafite on the label, Légende sells for more than twice that.

Her neighbour, a quieter, more thoughtful young man, then asked another, equally revealing question. Was it true, as he had been told by someone, that there was another very small region in France, not Bordeaux, that also made wine, some of it pretty good? Yes, he thought it might be called Burgundy.

The wines in my tasting were:

Felton Road, Block 2 Chardonnay 2008 Central Otago, New Zealand

Pewsey Vale Riesling 2009 Eden Valley, Australia

Robert Weil, Kiedrich Gräfenberg Riesling Erstes Gewächs 2005 Rheingau, Germany

Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2009 Central Otago, New Zealand

Domaine Coche-Dury 2008 Bourgogne Rouge, Burgundy, France

Marimar Estate, Don Miguel Vineyard, La Masia Pinot Noir 2006 Russian River Valley, California

Château Brassac 2009 Bordeaux Rouge, France

Château Saint-Paul 2005 Haut-Médoc, Bordeaux, France

Château Mouton Baronne Philippe 1986 Pauillac, Bordeaux, France