

Appreciating *Vino* the Sky

CURIOUS WITH HOW WINES ARE PICKED FOR THE PLEASURE OF THE FREQUENT TRAVELLERS?

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In the past, to spice up a much dreaded long flight, I would 'smuggle' a bottle of my favoured wine onboard, much to the chagrin of my travel partner. Such 'secret' pleasure became historical after the horrific September 11 disaster on United States soil. Despite those gloomy days, according to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), through the first four months of 2011, there was an 8.5 percent increase year-on-year in premium passenger (business and first-class seats) traffic, which were the most pricey and profitable categories for many airlines. Nevertheless, fuel cost and economy performances have considerable impact over travel behaviour and airlines' bottom-line. In such competitive scenario, airlines must have higher aspiration than just providing a safe and punctual flight. To engage and keep premium passengers satisfied, it become vital to offer unique services in enhancing travel experience - such as indulging customers in fine wines. In a conscious effort to delight their premium passengers, many worthy airlines parachuted in wine specialists to create an imitable range of wines.



The Wine-Focus Airlines

In the annual World Airline Awards by United States market research firm Skytrax, which audits and conduct research for airlines and airports, most of the top airlines on their list were based in Asia-Pacific region. The top ranking was achieved through several established criteria, chief among which was food and beverage (F&B) and staff service. The 2011 edition saw Qatar Airways leading the chart, with Singapore Airlines (SIA) and Asiana Airlines completing the top three spots. Yet, in cellar in the sky 2011 award – an annual wine competition organised by Business Travellers magazine – Qantas Airways, Qatar Airways and Air New Zealand top the ranking from a pool of 36 participating airlines. Past years' record also saw Asian-based airline such as Cathay Pacific, Singapore Airlines and All Nippon Airways (ANA) consistently featured as the winner in various categories.

Why a short & stout wine glass?
Due to limited space in the airplane, as well as safety and security issues, some airlines may not serve wines in a stemware glass that consumers are familiar with in a restaurant setting.

From a macro perspective, the scale of investment in wine procurement reflected a serious effort of those airlines in distinguishing their offering from others. As an indication, SIA's annual wine budget is around S\$16 million; they serve approximately 2.1 million bottles of wines on board every year, and across all classes; a considerable huge endeavour by any measure.

The Wines

Obviously, wines suitable for restaurants and other eateries may appear to be inappropriate for onboard service. Gaining a favourable review or scoring a few medals in wine competitions will also not guarantee success in being selected for an airliner. Apparently, the altitude and cabin pressure top the selection criterion. Such factors, I was told, dull the senses and disrupt



Do you know?
All opened bottles of wines while the plane is in flight must be emptied when the plane landed at its destination.

the enjoyment of wine. Thus, wines with distinct flavours were much preferred. Young, full-bodied wines also edged out aged and delicate vino. While wines with low alcohol concentration is ideal, as it prevent incidences where passengers may overindulge and lead to embarrassing and difficult situation. Also airlines are concerned with high alcohol wine causing nasty jet lag effects for their passengers. Sometimes certain wines were deemed suitable based on 'essential' reason, as they provide comfort and familiarity to weary passengers. Thus, it is common to see Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc being featured in many airlines. It was also crucial to consider the preferences of premium passengers in different categories. For example, a German Riesling may be considered as 'too sweet' for first-class passengers, as they may demand a traditional and dry wine style. By the same token, a bottle of champagne denotes class, as compare to a bottle of cava (despite both were made using traditional method). In oozing classiness, some airlines lavished their passengers with rare and fine wines. Since 1 August 2010, SIA featured six acclaimed red Burgundy grand cru wines for its suites and first-class customers. Such exclusive arrangement made SIA the only airline to offer those exceptional and prestigious labels onboard, thus, providing a major differentiation to its competitors. Wines were also chosen based on the route that each flight will service. A carrier with regular flights to a certain destination, such as New Zealand, may feature a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. Other national airlines based in a wine-producing country may also prefer to avail their local wines to its passengers. Nevertheless, for a wine to successfully hit on any airline wine menu, the practical factors such as budgets, volumes, labels and packaging still rule.

The Wine Consultants

In early days, airlines used to select wines based on price, supply and quality. These days, as passengers become increasingly savvy, airlines looked towards trained sommeliers, Master of Wines (MW), or international wine personalities for the selection role. Naturally, those appointments will also bring along credibility for an airlines' repute. The wines from SIA are selected by three world-renowned wine experts - Michael Hill-Smith, Australia's first MW; Jeannie Cho Lee, the first Asian MW; and Steven Spurrier, a leading authority and author on wine. Cathay Pacific employs three wine consultants - Roy Moorfield from Australia, Vic Williams from New Zealand and Hong Kong wine critic Lau Chi-Sun, to make their final selections. Beyond Asia, some of the airline wine consultants include Andrea Robinson, a well-known wine educator and writer for Delta Airlines. Doug Frost, a Kansas-based educator consults for United Airlines, while Ken Chase, a winemaker and radio-wine-show host in Canada is a consultant for American Airlines.

The Selection Process

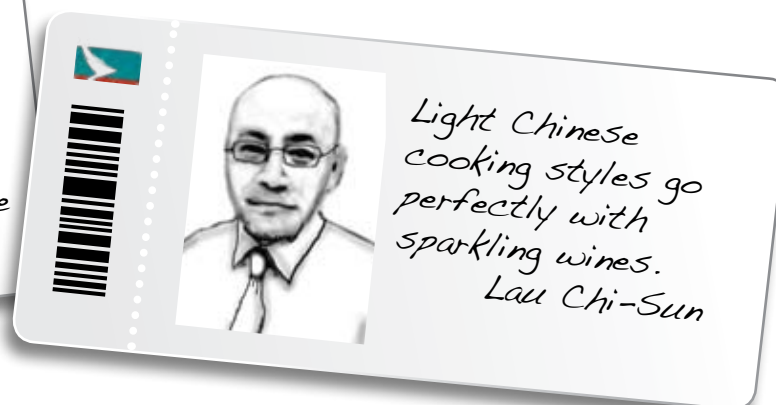
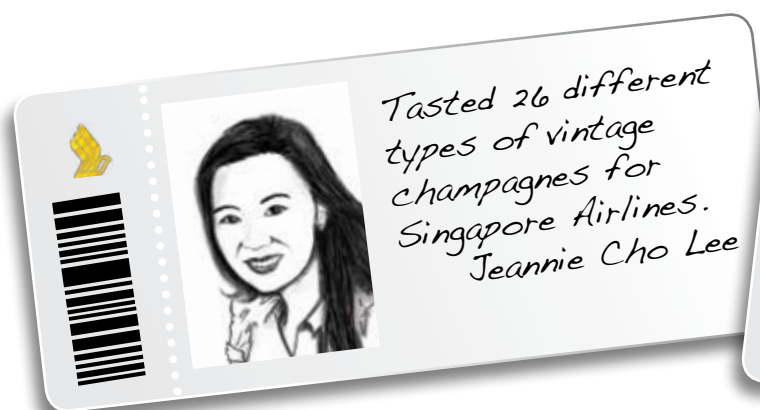
Airlines often issued tenders to list out specifics of wines to be submitted for considerations. Information such as type of wines, quantity, delivery times, and price range were standard affairs for any flight operation wine tender exercise. For wineries or wine merchants keen in participating, one key consideration was the high volume demanded by flight operation; as such criteria may not be every winery's cup of tea. Although it is also known that some wine estates have less of an issue with such concern, as they perceived an inclusion as a privilege and triumph in branding, especially in premium airlines, as such association can lead to remarkable marketing advantages. Without doubt, most airline wine consultants select wines through blind tasting, with some even holding their tasting

in a flight-simulator room. Annually, SIA conducts two formal tastings in Singapore. Up to 1,000 bottles of red and white wines, champagne and port were sampled. Although many airlines conduct their own blind tasting, some flight companies arranged for their consultants to visit a selected wine region, vineyard and wineries, sampling the products and making recommendation onsite. Almost all airline wines were held in bonded warehouses and released only when it is required for flight operation. Such arrangement ensured the wines are essentially duty-free. Singapore Airlines, on the other hand, maintain a warehouse for wine aging purpose, rather than simply storing wines; thus, they were able to cellar their premium wines for an extended period of time.

Educating Cabin Crew

Besides spending millions in wine procurement, many airlines also put resources in training and educating their cabin crew on the finer point of wine service, as well as acquiring wine knowledge so as to complete the onboard wine appreciation experience. For example, Air France not only engaged wine consultant to craft their wine list, it also guided the staff towards finer points of champagne presentation and appreciation. Besides providing professional wine service to passengers, some airlines expect their flight crew to promote wine knowledge among their peers. Singapore Airlines' cabin crews were one such example. They were taught the essentials of wine appreciation during their ground training, including how and where different wines were produced as well as the unique characteristics of different wines. Those interested in acquiring more wine knowledge may progress to advance courses - United Kingdom's Wine & Spirit Education Trust's (WSET) intermediate and advanced certificate in Wines & Spirits, an

The Panel Review



established wine programme that SIA conducts for the keener flight crew. Selected crew with required certification may opt to become SIA air sommeliers through a specially-developed wine programme. Since 2004, being a wine specialist with diverse exposure internationally, I have the privilege to be appointed as the programme developer and facilitator for SIA sommelier programme, educating cabin crews aiming to attain higher knowhow in managing and appreciating wines. As requirement for onboard wine service and engagement were different from wine enjoyment on ground, most airlines focuses on equipping participants with the necessary soft skills to achieve that objective. More importantly, such expertise in onboard wine services distinguishes an airline in a competitive market. LHP

Tafelwein? Pinot Gris?
Piquant?
Riesling?
Chardonnay?



Recognising a wine specialist on air
More often than not, a badge will be awarded to cabin crew who has attained a high level of wine knowledge. In SIA, a Sommelier badge will be found just below the nametag of a cabin crew, distinguishing him or her as the wine specialist.



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