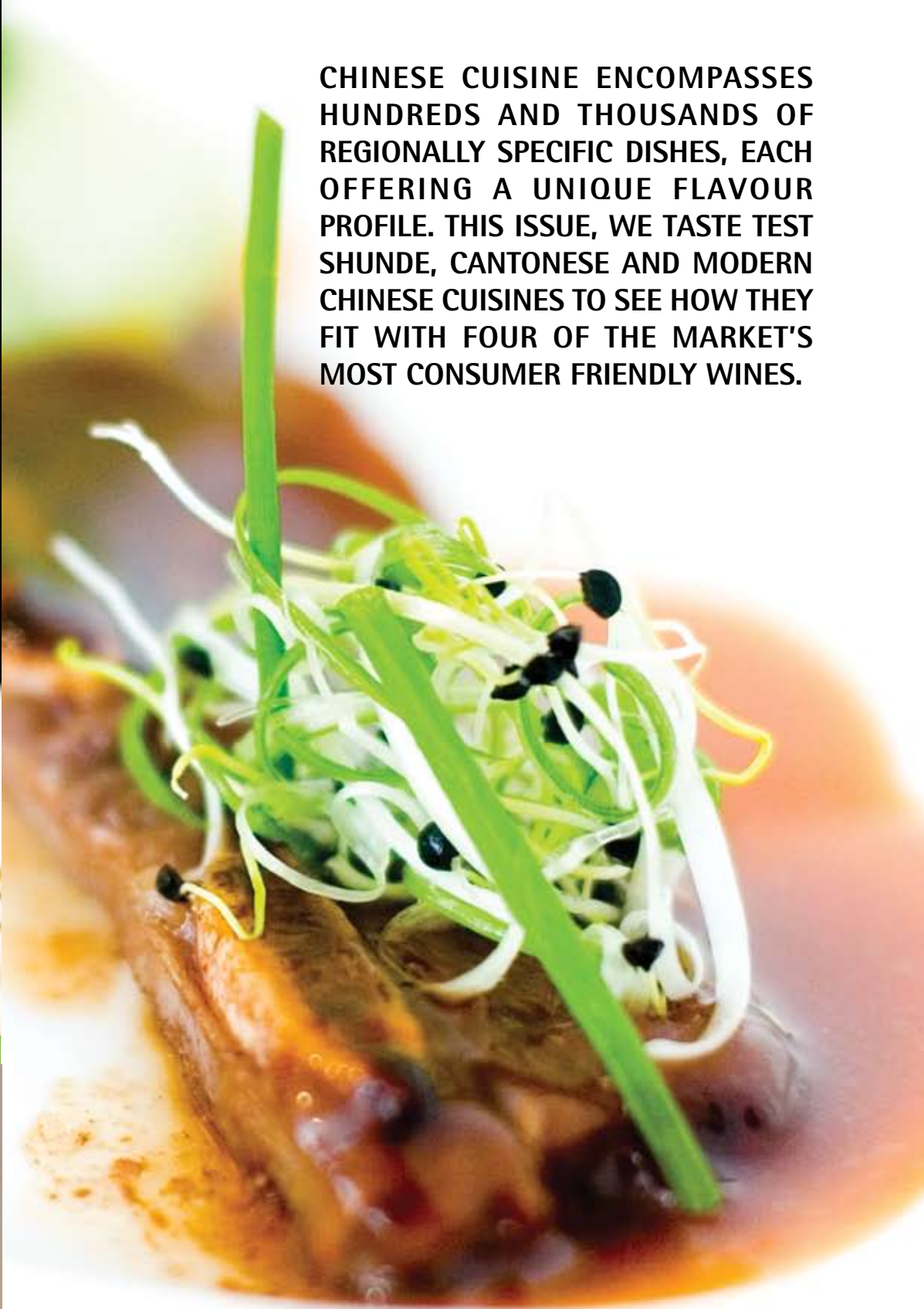


Putting *Asia's Flavours* To The **Test**

CHINESE CUISINE ENCOMPASSES HUNDREDS AND THOUSANDS OF REGIONALLY SPECIFIC DISHES, EACH OFFERING A UNIQUE FLAVOUR PROFILE. THIS ISSUE, WE TASTE TEST SHUNDE, CANTONESE AND MODERN CHINESE CUISINES TO SEE HOW THEY FIT WITH FOUR OF THE MARKET'S MOST CONSUMER FRIENDLY WINES.





“There’s a lot of fruit, like black cherries, and it’s also a bit plummy. But there’s something distinctive about this wine — smokiness.”

A glass of wine a day keeps the doctor away. Right? Well, not quite. As the French Paradox theory goes, regular and moderate consumption of wine is most beneficial to one’s health when drunk with food. So technically, that glass of Château d’Yquem is really much better for your heart and arteries (and your taste buds!) when paired with a lovely, plump piece of pan-seared foie gras, some fig jam, toasted brioche and a red wine reduction (drizzled over for good measure). As wine writer and educator Lim Hwee Peng advocates, “When people say wine is good for your health, it’s only 50 percent true. You must have food also — that’s the other 50 percent. If you only have wine, there’s just the alcohol. If you just have the food alone, there are fats and everything. But if you put both together, they will interact and it’s healthier. Wine with food is good for your health.” Of course, issues of well-being aside, there’s also the fact that food and wine are clearly complementary. But what should one expect when dining in a restaurant? Should diners expect the chef to tweak cooking methods to suit the sommelier’s wine list, or is the wine meant to complement the cuisine? Jenny Tan, wine writer, argues for both sides, “For normal dinners at restaurants, the food should be in focus. But for wine dinners, the chefs should go with the wine.” She also adds, “I guess that’s why a lot of chefs can’t do wine dinners,” pointing out the fact that many top toques aren’t willing to modify their recipes to harmonise better with wines. While Lim also agrees that “chefs can tweak the taste but the wine cannot change, it is the common denominator”, he is a firm believer that cuisine should lead the way when one is ordering at a restaurant. He says, “If I want to have an experience of food and wine, and a very pleasant one, I’ll go to a restaurant where food plays the most important part. I will bring or order the wines to suit the foods I want to taste. If I just want to enjoy the wine, I’d go to a wine bar.”

From a business point of view, the increased interest in pairing food and wine is both a boon and bane for restaurants. Steven Thong, a manager with the Tung Lok Group explains, “Most of the hotels and restaurants today have a wine range of labels to suit the guests’ palates; we have over 100 labels here. But it’s now also the norm for guests to bring their own wines (BYO), because the restaurant doesn’t stock the labels or vintages they prefer to drink. Per day, I sell about ten to 15 bottles of wine, and there are about four to five tables that will BYO — a group of ten persons could easily bring up to three bottles of wine. I think, to be fair to the restaurant, paying corkage is a must. We have a huge wine list here, with some very good wines; it’s a matter of whether guests want to pay for the wines.” A Tung Lok Group restaurant, Club Chinois, charges S\$30 a bottle for corkage, which is really quite reasonable. Some restaurants here charge a corkage fee of S\$50 per bottle simply to deter diners from bringing their own wines. In all fairness to dining establishments, many of which already stock wines to suit the restaurant’s signature dishes, most in the wine trade feel that the BYO option should only be exercised for special, fine and rare bottles of wines. For example, Matthew Ng, restaurant manager of the Four Seasons Hotel’s Jiang-Nan Chun restaurant, recently had some regular customers bringing in their own bottles of Vega Sicilia Unico, from the 1960s vintages. They called him up in advance to arrange the menu for a boy’s night out, and Ng was more than willing to arrange some special orders. Offering her view on such situations, Tan shares, “When people come in with a nice bottle of wine and they really want the food to go with it — those are the occasions when you



need to rise to the occasion." Ng also recalled a recent dinner party where one-third of the cheque was billed to food, and the rest was for wines – an equation that would put a smile on any owner's face. "How much wagyu beef can you eat anyway?" Ng muses, "But for wines, it is endless." Giving her advice on what to look out for on wine lists, Tan shares, "At a top notch restaurant, look out for very good houses and really good vintages on the wine list – wines you know you will not be able to source for on your own. Personally, when I go to a normal restaurant with a decent wine list, I look out for wines from the lesser known countries."

The Wines

On the surface, the two wineries featured in this issue seem to be worlds apart – they hail from different hemispheres and from opposite ends of the Pacific Ocean – but they have more in common than the fact that they're both major parts of the global drinks company, Foster's Group. Penfolds is as synonymous to South Australia as Beringer is to the Napa Valley. Both wineries produce benchmark wines of their regions (think: Penfolds Grange and Beringer's Private Reserve), as well as a range of other wines for wine drinkers at all levels. Thomas Hyland and Founders' Estate wines are also known to punch above their weight – they may be entry-level wines available at supermarkets, but are in no aspect sloppily made. Lim explained the motivation for

businesses like Penfolds and Beringer to offer such wines, "The very first experience for a non-wine drinker is the most important. In the early days, every wine you drank tasted sour and people thought that was the taste of all wines. So they'd go try something else. But once people try something like the Thomas Hyland wines, they will get hooked and will try to keep finding out more."

So, to start out on a simple note, we put the spotlight on 'everyday value' wines – varietally correct wines, offering good value for the price range they're slated in. First up are the 2005 Shiraz and 2006 Chardonnay, from Penfolds' Thomas Hyland range, named for the son-in-law of the winery's founder Dr Christopher Rawson. These are entry-level, fruit-driven wines, underpinned by a touch of new oak. Lim's overall assessment of both wines deems them consumer friendly and enjoyable on their own. Appraising the 2006 Penfolds Thomas Hyland Chardonnay, Lim noted: pronounced toastiness and oak nuances at the forefront of the bouquet, supported by ripe citrus and pear fruit aromas; ripeness of fruits was apparent at the entry, offering plenty of juicy ripeness and firm acidity on the palate, ending with a clean, lengthy note. With the Shiraz, Lim's notes paint a picture of a typical South Australian Shiraz: deep brilliant appearance with ripe red and black fruit aromas, spice, and a medium toastiness on the nose; a medium-bodied wine with softness and juicy black fruit flavours on the palate; finishes with length. Next on the list are Beringer vineyards' Founders' Estate Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, two wines which reflect typical Napa Valley characteristics and are made in consultation with culinary professionals to increase their pairing potential with foods. Defining the profile of the 2005 Founders' Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Tan describes, "There's a lot of fruit, like black cherries, and it's also a bit plummy. But there's something distinctive about this wine – smokiness." With the 2006 Founders' Estate Chardonnay, Tan's review reads: quite a sweet nose, very ripe with melons and bananas; it's quite charming actually; this is definitely Californian Chardonnay, and it's quite good on a hot day if you want to just chill out and have it with some snacks.



Jenny Tan

The Taste Tests

Park Palace

Not wanting to offer yet another Cantonese cuisine restaurant, Grand Plaza Park Hotel decided to introduce regional Shunde cooking to Singapore in mid-2007 with the opening of Park Palace restaurant. The food is mainly seafood-based, as Shunde is a province located in the Pearl River Delta, and specialty foods include shark cheeks, home-made fish cake, fish maw as well as prawns with fried egg white (cooked in a wok over very low heat, and stirred until firm but still soft). For the health conscious, Shunde cuisine is an agreeable choice as little oil is used in the cooking methods and dishes are often lightly seasoned. Park Palace's first dish of oven-baked lobster with minced pork and black bean sauce was offered as a pairing for the 2006 Penfolds Thomas Hyland Chardonnay. Lim, who was on hand to evaluate the pairings, revealed his verdict, "The fruit flavours of the Chardonnay matches the sweetness of the lobster meat. This is a perfect dish chosen for the wine but I would differ on the preparation method, the lobster is a bit over cooked, too dry for this wine." Lim suggested that the lobster be served less 'done', perhaps in a sashimi style. Danny Tan, food and beverage manager of Grand Plaza Park Hotel City Hall, also agreed with Lim's findings, and added that the layer of seafood mousse on top of the lobster probably extended the dish's cooking time, and dried out the lobster meat. As each lobster dish came paired with two florets of broccoli, I asked Lim if he considered their affect on the dish. "It's just like a cocktail," he explained, "When the bartender puts a cherry on top, it's not meant to be part of the actual cocktail concoction." Garnishes, Lim concludes, shouldn't be taken into consideration when it comes to food and wine pairings, "Broccoli served like that contributes only texture. Unless you get a vegetable which has a lot of flavour, like mushrooms, then it's a definite consideration for the wine. Mushrooms are quite pungent and flavoursome as well, you can actually pair mushroom dishes with Barolo wines." The next dish served by Park Palace – pan-fried beef ribs with chef's special sauce – was destined for the 2005 Penfolds Thomas Hyland Shiraz. This pairing wasn't as

successful as the first, as Lim reasoned, "This is a case of the sauce dominating the wine. There's pepper and sweetness (from the oyster sauce) in the chef's special sauce, but the wine is rather fruity so they clash. What I like is the pure beef flavour with the Shiraz. For the sauce, I think a Saint Emilion or even a Bordeaux-blend from Margaret River would be better."

The next three typical Shunde dishes which followed weren't originally intended for our wine and food pairing exercise, but we decided to go ahead and test them for purely experimental reasons. To start us off on the right foot, Lim reminded us that the wines should take a supporting role in the pairings to come. "If the food and wine were put together and one element had to dominate, I'd prefer the food to dominate the wine. At the end of the day, when I come to a restaurant it's because of the food." With this advice in mind, we cut into Park Palace's pan-fried lotus root stuffed with minced pork and mushrooms, accompanied by a spicy-sweet sauce. "The lotus root itself doesn't have much flavour, the tastes come from the batter instead," Lim pointed out. "So I'd prefer the Chardonnay to support this dish." However, Lim also suggested a Riesling or New World Sauvignon Blanc to complement the fried lotus root with some acidity. The next dish, Shunde-style fried egg white with prawns, was also better suited to the 2006 Penfolds

Tasting Tip:

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Lim Hwee Peng

Lu Zhi Ming



steamed rice in clear consommé
with garoupa

Thomas Hyland Chardonnay. Egg white is a 'dangerous' ingredient when it comes to food and wine pairing. Lim reveals, "Egg white not only pushes down the wine flavours, it can actually spoil the wine's taste. Red wine, especially, is a no-no; white wines can stand up to egg white dominant dishes if they're a bit more oaked, or if some sauces are added to the dish. This Chardonnay has a bit more oak so it works."

Jiang-Nan Chun

Restaurant manager of Jiang-Nan Chun, Matthew Ng, is a veteran of the local wine industry and has many years of experience offering his customers advice on pairing wines with the restaurant's Cantonese cuisine. In the kitchen, Chef Steven Ng (no relation) heads up the culinary team that is respected for serving some of Singapore's finest Cantonese cuisine. Having worked together for almost two years, the Ng duo enjoys a relationship that is truly complementary – they take pleasure in discussing the relationship between cuisine and wine while having drinks together after working hours. To start the pairings off, they chose a dish featuring the oily fish, cod. Ng explained, "The 2006 Penfolds Thomas Hyland Chardonnay is rounder and fatter, so we decided to go with a fish. The cod is slightly dusted with flour and then pan-fried. The base of the sauce is soy sauce, which is typically Cantonese, but we made it very light as too much saltiness or sweetness can make a wine taste totally flat." Lim was full of praise for this pairing, "I think the flavours complement each other very well. For a wine that's primarily sweet (like the Chardonnay), when you pair it with something salty (like soy sauce, for example), the fruitiness of the wine is actually enhanced. I also like the fact that the crispy cod fish adds an additional element of texture to the white wine." When

considering the amount of soy sauce to include in the dish, Ng says it was toned down from the normal amount, "We were very careful to make sure the soy sauce enhanced the wine, instead of killing it."

Turning to our glasses of 2005 Penfolds Thomas Hyland Shiraz, we listened as Ng described the dish choice for the next pairing, "We chose a very traditional Cantonese dish – black pepper beef with green bell peppers. In this case, we used Marblescore grade eight wagyu beef, Japanese green bell peppers and mushrooms. The wagyu beef is very soft, but the mushrooms give the dish a bit of texture and crunchiness; the bell peppers add freshness." Instead of dominating the sauce with black pepper, Chef Ng chose to use a blend including Sichuan pepper and white pepper powder, as well as some minced garlic. The overall

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"When people say wine is good for your health, it's only 50 percent true. You must have food also – that's the other 50 percent. If you only have wine, there's just the alcohol. If you just have the food alone, there are fats and everything. But if you put both together, they will interact and it's healthier. Wine with food is good for your health." Lim Hwee Peng



Asian Food & Wine Pairings



black pepper wagyu beef with mushroom & Japanese bell pepper ◆

2005 Penfolds Thomas Hyland Shiraz

The textures of the food and the wine go very well together; both are very soft. For the taste, I'd prefer the sauce to be a little stronger as I'm tasting a lot of the pure meat when I bite into each wagyu cube. I'd put in a little bit more sauce and drive more flavour into the meat. Right now the Shiraz is the main focus of the pairing, and I think it can be more balanced. LHP



pan-fried cod with soy sauce ◆

2006 Penfolds Thomas Hyland Chardonnay

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duck confit with smoked bone jus ★

2005 Beringer Founders' Estate Cabernet Sauvignon

The sweetness of the sauce, which has red wine in it, complements the sweetness of the wine. And there are also smoky hints in the dish and wine that complement each other. JT

pan-fried beef ribs with chef's special sauce *

2005 Penfolds Thomas Hyland Shiraz

This is a case of the sauce dominating the wine. There's pepper and sweetness (from the oyster sauce) in the chef's special sauce, but the wine is rather fruity so they clash. What I like is the pure beef flavour with the Shiraz. LHP



oven-baked lobster with minced pork & black bean sauce *

2006 Penfolds Thomas Hyland Chardonnay

The fruit flavours of the Chardonnay matches the sweetness of the lobster meat. This is a perfect dish chosen for the wine but I would differ on the preparation method, the lobster is a bit over cooked, too dry for this wine. LHP



steamed soon hock with mushroom jus & winter melon, wrapped in lotus leaf ★

2006 Beringer Founders' Estate Chardonnay

One of the things that struck me was the creamy texture of the wine, which actually goes quite well with the softness of the soon hock. But I think the Chardonnay is a little too sweet for the dish even though it is a food friendly wine with good acidity levels. You can still pair this dish with a Chardonnay, but pick one that has less ripe fruits. JT



effect created a sauce that wasn't biting, but was full of flavour and had a little hint of tanginess. Lim's assessment of this particular pairing was again, complimentary, but he did have suggestions for improvement, "The textures of the food and the wine go very well together; both are very soft. For the taste, I'd prefer the sauce to be a little stronger as I'm tasting a lot of the pure meat when I bite into each wagyu cube. I'd put in a little bit more sauce and drive more flavour into the meat. Right now the Shiraz is the main focus of the pairing, and I think it can be more balanced." While Ng agreed the pairing could do with more balance, he offered a different suggestion to solve the 'problem'. "The wine could be served cooler," he proposed, "Then the fruitiness would be brought down a little." This method, Ng added, wouldn't distract from the delicate flavour of the wagyu beef.

Club Chinois

Enthusiastic is a word which definitely describes Chef Ken Ling and his team at Club Chinois – they actually sat through a tasting of over 20 dishes before settling on the final two to match the coupling of Beringer Founders' Estate wines. In fact, Club Chinois' team even sent

me some tasting notes (via E-mail) on the pairings prior to our lunch appointment. Describing the 2006 Beringer Founders' Estate Chardonnay, the notes read: youthful appearance with apparent toastiness and enticing aromas of coconut and vanillin (a possible indication of the use of new, lightly-toasted French barrels) and ripe citrus fruits; on the palate, it has a nice soft, velvety texture (unexpected of a Founders' Estate wine), with pleasant ripe pear flavours pleasantly; clean, almost lingering fruity finish; excellent wine for a wine of this level! Although dishes like Peking duck and foie gras, roasted pork rib, and pan-seared scallops with spicy sauce were in the running to match the Chardonnay, a fish dish eventually won the privilege – it was steamed soon hock (marble goby) with mushroom jus and winter melon, wrapped in lotus leaf. Explaining the team's choice in further detail, Thong said, "This Chardonnay doesn't have too many complex characters. If I chose a more full-bodied meat type, it would overpower the wine, so I needed a fish to go with the texture of the Chardonnay." After taste testing the pairing, Tan found a good match in texture but a lack of balance in the flavours. She explained, "One of the things that struck me was the creamy texture of the wine, which actually goes quite well with the softness of the soon hock. But I think

- ★ Club Chinois, Orchard Parade Hotel Singapore, 1 Tanglin Road, Singapore 247905, Tel: (65) 6834 0660
- ◆ Jiang-Nan Chun, Four Seasons Hotel Singapore, 190 Orchard Boulevard, Singapore 248646, Tel: (65) 6734 1110
- * Park Palace, Grand Plaza Park Hotel City Hall, 10 Coleman Street, Singapore 179809, Tel: (65) 6336 3456

Tasters
Lim Hwee Peng (LHP)
Jenny Tan (JT)

the Chardonnay is a little too sweet for the dish even though it is a food friendly wine with good acidity levels. You can still pair this dish with a Chardonnay, but pick one that has less ripe fruits." Sashimi-style Hokkaido scallops with a little shoyu sauce, Tan suggested, would be a better pairing for the 2006 Beringer Founders' Estate Chardonnay.

The final dish that graced this issue's Asian food and wine pairing exercise was a true East-meets-West offering — duck confit with smoked bone jus. To reference the restaurant's tasting notes one again, the team's expression of the 2005 Beringer Founders' Estate Cabernet Sauvignon reads: bright ruby, brilliant appearance, with fresh aromas of oak, spiciness, and ripe red and black berry fruits; a medium-bodied wine with loads of ripeness especially on the mid-palate; finishes clean and dry, though fruitiness lingers momentarily; certainly a food wine. Agreeing with the team's description, Tan added, "The tannins are not the usual puckering tannins. The wine is not harsh at all, it's quite soft actually and it is quite a food friendly wine." As Thong explained, duck drumstick was selected over other meats as it had a medium-bodied texture. Heavier meats like lamb and beef would have overpowered the Cabernet Sauvignon, and using chicken meat would have caused the opposite effect. Although Tan had initial misgivings about the match, it didn't take more than two mouthfuls to convince her of its merits. "Initially when I saw the duck, I was a bit hesitant. I thought that Californian wine, being pretty 'big', would have overpowered the duck. Actually, when I tasted the Cabernet Sauvignon with just the duck meat, the wine was quite a bit overpowering. But when I tried the pairing with the sauce, everything went quite well together. The sweetness of the sauce, which has red wine in it, complements the sweetness of the wine. And there are also smoky hints in the dish and wine that complement each other."

A Quick Round Up

One constant observation from both Lim and Tan, was that the four wines featured this issue are all consumer friendly — the abundant, soft fruit flavours will appeal to most people. Also, Lim emphasised, "Everything is in the glass, there's very little a server needs to explain to a diner at a restaurant." Indeed, making wines more accessible to diners is the duty of a good restaurant. And as Tan noted at Clubinois, glassware plays an important role in a diner's appreciation of wine. "Diners are not going to spend half a day in a restaurant, so you want to express young wines in the shortest amount of time." Glassware, like Mikasa's Open Up series, works well for extracting more from varietally correct wines that aren't too much about complexity. For wines that are meant to be savoured slowly however, speeding up the whole process would be akin to committing a cardinal sin. Lim also pointed out that restaurants can and should control when wines are served with each course. He explained, "There are certain foods that you need to have first before the wine, to let the flavours envelope your palate. And then when you drink the wine after, you can really tell whether they match or not." On the other hand, there are some pairings that are best enjoyed by taking a sip of wine right after having a mouthful of food; an example would be when scallop carpaccio is served with some fruity Viognier. Lim adds, "Chances are, if a wine is poured, I will drink it first. Servers can control how the food and wines are matched by sequencing also. Serve the food first and let the guest know that the wine will be poured in a while." CY

Tasting Tip:

"For normal dinners at restaurants, the food should be in focus. But for wine dinners, the chefs should go with the wine." Jenny Tan

