

WINE & ITS PEOPLE

Is the quality of wine solely responsible for its success?
Does the maker's personality shape the success of the product?
LIM HWEE PENG shares his thoughts.



The wine industry is unique in many ways, chief of which is the people element that allows wine to sustain and thrive in a competitive and fickle market.

There are many trained professionals involved in the wine trade; within the winery, there are winemakers, cellar rats, cellar-door staff, winery guide and other winery operating crew; while in the commercial department, wine merchants, wine marketers, exporters and communication and education professionals complete the rest of the people equation in the wine industry.

Interestingly, when wines are accorded superb quality or celestial status, its maker and everyone associated with it somehow are elevated to a celebrity standing.

Much like celebrity chefs who make their rounds on television food programs, or special features in publications, 'superstar winemakers' are also emerging from the various domaine and vineyards from both old and new world.

Given such limelight, some over-the-top winemakers, through their behaviour, do think that they are God's gifts to the industry. Unaware of certain cultural context, their mannerisms can at times be viewed as arrogant or rude, and become detrimental to their efforts in promoting their well-crafted wines. However, to be fair to the profession, those black sheep are, fortunately, the minority.

Down-to-Earth Craftsmen

In my years of visiting and interviewing winemakers, there were wine craftsmen, regardless of their reputation in the wine world, who remain humble and down-to-earth.

Dr. Mike Peterkin, winemaker and owner of Pierro Wines in Margaret River, Western Australia, was one of the first few pleasant personalities whom I have met. Mike looks nothing unusual from any Down Under winemakers, but after spending some intense moments with the retired doctor, one will realise that he is fascinated with all things Chinese. A 'Chinese trapped in a Caucasian body' was the impression I had of him.

Such oriental affinity started when his knee ailment was, in his opinion, miraculously healed through regular practice of ancient Chinese martial arts - taiji and qi gong. In his winery, Chinese calligraphy can be found littered at the entrance and walls of the reception area. He even has Chinese characters inscribed on Fire Gully, his second label wine.

At subsequent meetings, I came to realise that he was very much oriental in his mannerism too. It can be a Zen experience when conversing with the Aussie doc, who still surfs and actively participates in qi gong and taiji.

Though Mike's Pierro Chardonnay is regarded as the cream of the crop in the international wine world, this down-to-earth winemaker will impress visitors with his almost always positive attitude. Such considerate and well-mannered vintners are not exclusive to the new world powerhouses.

In my encounter with the Old World superstar wineries, Jean-Charles le Bault de la Morinière of Bonneau du Martray in Burgundy stood out. My first meeting with this true gentleman was in early 2000 at a local wine and food festival. Lanky, gentle, and very Englishman-like in his mannerism, I found the French vintner to be polite and sincere from the moment we were introduced to each other.

Jean-Charles is a celebrity winemaker, considering that his wine has been accorded an almost cult status among the Burgundy's best. Yet, he displayed none of those prima donna behaviour, which were common among some of Jean-Charles' contemporaries.

Architect by training, Jean-Charles took over his family estate upon the demise of his beloved father. Not only has he ensured continuity over the family domaine, Jean-Charles took the estate to a higher level with his keenness in improving the family jewel. Some may even argue that it was he who improved his father's effort in making a top-notch red wine from the renowned Corton hill, famous for producing fine and exquisite white wines. In my recent visit to his estate, we arrived in the midst of a very important phase of any winery – the harvest. Nevertheless, Jean-Charles took the trouble to spend a considerable amount of time in sharing the nuances of the hill and, of course, his wines. Generous not only with his time, Jean-Charles readily shared his treasured wines from various old vintages, as well as taking pains to explain the uniqueness of those wines; more impressively, the French architect welcomes opinions.

The fine quality of Bonneau du Martray is doubtless, though it is in the dear and rare wine category, I would not hesitate in purchasing those delicate and rare wines, even though it would likely cost me an arm and a leg, simply because Jean-Charles has left an indelible mark with his exceptional personality of a truly world-class winemaker.



Thierry Fritsch, the tireless Alsace wine ambassador

Remarkable Wine Marketers

In my course of work, I have also met and worked with vintners who were not directly involved with winemaking, such as promotional board's representatives. If one has the opportunity to meet Thierry Fritsch, the globetrotting ambassador for Alsace wine promotion board, CIVA, one will realise that it is indeed critical to appoint the correct person with the appropriate personality to represent a wine trade board.

Thierry is the embodiment of Alsace wine – clean, pure and beautiful. When interpreted to human characteristics, it is his honesty, passion and, well, pleasant appearance that distinguishes him from others. Honesty, because Fritsch comes across as who he is, and takes his task seriously with no intention of shortchanging anyone; Thierry is also intensely passionate with his mission to promote Alsace wines. And lastly, his handsome appearance is highly appreciated by his female fans, which may grow into a



Dr. Mike Peterkin



Jean-Charles, the French architect turned celebrity winemaker

legion of ladies soon. He is tall and lanky, similar to the Alsace bottle shape. Thierry's effort in promoting Alsace wines should be compiled into a travelogue, since his footprints can be found far and wide in various continents spreading the good word of Alsace wines. Thierry Fritsch is, in my view, a key asset that the Alsace wine trade board cannot afford to do without.

While still on the importance of appointing the right representative, my newfound interest in South African wines was in major part due to the interaction and sharing with Andre Morgenthal, Communication Manager, Wines of South Africa (WOSA), the promotional board for South African wine industry. His background is rather similar to mine, and we could understand each other well with regards to appreciating differing wine styles, understanding international trends and issues, and also marketing and promotional strategies in international markets. Andre's duty deals very much with the marketing activities and market visits. Judging from his traveling schedule, he should be, almost permanently, living

out of his suitcase.

His keenness in ensuring South African wines are being viewed seriously by international communities is obvious from his punishing work hour both at home and abroad.

Nonetheless, he enjoys visiting places of different cultures, and in his last trip to Singapore, he was only contented after we had savoured some of the local delights, such as hor fun, claypot frog legs and live seafood dishes. He eats like a local, dresses like one and enjoys eating like every other Singaporean.

Passionate about his work, yet with both feet planted firmly on the ground, Andre keeps his head well on the shoulder, while blending comfortably into cultures other than his.

It is such uniqueness that makes him, and other vintners with realistic and sensible personalities, appealing to the Asian market, where the people-element and passion are much highly prized than celebrity status.



Andre Morgenthal sharing the nuances of South African wines