

# californian cult wines

NEW WORLD WONDER-  
WINE OR MARKETING  
PLOY, HERE'S HOW YOU  
CAN GET YOUR HANDS  
ON SOME



It will be a little audacious and infer that fine and rare wines with a pedigree the likes of Chateau Petrus, Le Pin, Domaine de la Romanée-Conti and La Tache are the ancestors of Californian cult wines. Reason being that they share similar traits in their production technique (low yield, high extraction of flavours and oak-aged in 100 per cent new wood), production quantity (usually a few hundred to a few thousand cases produced yearly), as well as flavour elements and structure. The fine distinction between them lies in the centuries of credibility and admiration that classic French wines have established, against the comparatively youthful trend of Californian cult wines.

It may be a tad difficult for New World wine enthusiasts to stomach such a comparison, and it may even incur the wrath of classic wine lovers, but I would not be too far off the mark to assume that these premium French wines are probably the class benchmark used by present day Californian cult winemakers.

My first formal encounter with Californian cult wines was to say the least, an eye-opening experience. Given the opportunity to sample some of the favourites of the moment, as well as up-and-coming wines that were soon to be elevated to that 'unassailable' status, I was impressed with the wines' flavour intensity and amazing structure. A subsequent tasting at the Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore's 6th Annual New World Food and Wine Festival, affirmed my appreciation for the hugely successful cult wine phenomenon.

## Cult Stature

With production capped at somewhere around 500 cases, or 6,000 bottles per wine per year, demand for Californian cult wines naturally outstrips its supply. As expected, even with an increasing demand, there is no real impetus for wineries to increase their output. The consequence is an inevitable price increase. The price of a bottle that costs US\$200 when released can increase five-fold to record a minimum new price of US\$1,000 (depending on the vintage quality) or more on the open market. This





development implies that only a handful of wine lovers get the opportunity to savour this liquid gold. So, how does one get possession of such exclusive wines?

"The surest way to acquire a bottle of cult wine," Richard Torin, a wine merchant based in America reveals, "is to be listed on the winery's mailing list. However, unless you are of some significant status, you would quite unlikely be on that mailing list."

Even then, you are unlikely to get the opportunity to buy cases of the rare wine. "It's a rare product that needs to be distributed to a very big market," Torin explains. "So most wine lovers would, at best, be allocated three bottles per vintage." But all hope is not lost. The American wine merchant advises interested individuals bent on obtaining specific cult wines to purchase them on the open market. But be warned that they will be more expensive since prices would experience sharp increases.

## MORE COMPETITION MEANS BETTER QUALITY WINES FOR CONSUMERS.

As the commanding price of such wines can be exorbitant, some consumers do auction their special allocations of cult wines for a profit. Thus, the auction sale is another avenue for acquiring that seemingly out-of-reach Harlan Estate or Maya.

"There are bargains to be found at wine auctions," Torin reveals. "When the Dow Jones index dipped in 1998 and the tragedy of September 11 erupted, cult wines, together with other premium fine wines, saw an approximate 15 to 20 per cent drop in their prices." Indeed, it's possible for oenophiles to scout for good buys at auction sales. But depending on one's luck, wine knowledge and acumen, many a cult wine can be bought at a bargain.

Auctions however, may not be everyone's cup of tea. Interestingly, barter trading (that ancient mode of business) is yet another way of obtaining a bottle of that treasured wine. "In the early days of the cult wine phenomenon, through the exchanging of preferred wines with fellow wine enthusiasts, I was able to amass a vertical vintage of Screaming Eagle," Matthew Ng, manager of Culina sheepishly reveals. "I exchanged top-growth Bordeaux for Californian cult wines." However, the gourmet shop manager also admits that he does not indulge in these pricey wines for pleasure. Instead, he re-releases them into the market for a tidy profit — a classic example of mixing business with pleasure.

### Fad or fixture

With such a high demand for such wines over a short period of time, one could be forgiven for assuming the possibility of the trend fast waning off. "As with any ultra-luxurious product," says Torin, "demand will stagnate when times are bad, but it will never really decline. As long as there is a demand somewhere in the world market, cult wines will be here to stay."

But will competition from other similarly styled wines overwhelm the popularity of Californian cult wines? Fundamentally, even though Australian boutique wines, French vins de garage, and Italian Super Tuscans are crafted in similar fashion, Californian cult wines are a typically native marvel, and as long as the Californians support the trend (fortified with favourable reviews from wine critics), the popularity of cult wines look set to be a permanent feature on the American wine scene. In any case, any form of competition in a competitive market will generally benefit consumers. "More competition means better quality wines for consumers," Torin agrees. "But don't count on the prices for those limited and intensely flavoured wines plummeting."

Even without the noble pedigree of premier French wines, and with little track record to endorse its quality and longevity, Californian cults are without a doubt, well-made wines. They are wines that provide sensual pleasures, and which represent the fundamental expression of man's skilful handling of a natural produce.

Nevertheless, the cult wines' contemporary and heavily extracted fruit wine style is also a double-edged sword. While conquering the world market with its international appeal, its exclusivity may also create for itself, unnecessary snob appeal. It's been said that wines are to be enjoyed, not worshipped; and that clearly sums up my reservations. **WD**

*The Rare Cult Wine Workshop was part of The 6th Annual New World of Food and Wine Festival, presented by The Ritz-Carlton Millenia Singapore.*