

CULTURE

ELEVATING WINE CULTURE IN CHINA

With the massive Mainland China market growing rapidly, it's easy to forget that some tastes in the middle kingdom have only been acquired in the last decade, and none more so than a taste for wine. According to a survey conducted by International Wine and Spirit Research in 2013, the Mainland market consumed 158 million nine-litre cases of all types of wines, making it the fifth-largest consumer of wine in general. With every cork that pops, Watson's Wine is growing alongside the Mainland's taste for the great gift of the vine.





Credit: Kwan Cheuk Heen, Harbour Grand Hong Kong

The more sophisticated markets in Europe and North America have had centuries to learn the nuances of wine culture. The Mainland on the other hand, has done it overnight.

VOTRE SOMMELIER: MONSIEUR WATSON

Since its entrance into the Mainland market in 2007, Watson's Wine has contributed to building wine culture. In that time, Chinese consumers have evolved dramatically in terms of their preferences and knowledge of wine. A generation of cultured consumers has emerged, hungry for a better experience and thirsty for pristine wines.

Watson's Wine in China has worked through different channels to educate and empower consumers to make more sophisticated choices when it comes to picking wine. This includes retail stores, on-trade (hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, clubs), off-trade (super/hypermarkets, convenience stores), wholesalers and e-commerce. "We work with our trade partners including hoteliers and restaurateurs to provide tailored wine selections to meet their customer needs," says Johnny Lai, General Manager of Watson's Wine China. "We also support our wholesalers and other trade partners with professional wine training and recommendations to meet the needs of each type of end consumer."

Their efforts seem to be paying off. While less expensive domestically produced wine still takes up the lion's share of the market, demand for better quality imported wines has been increasing rapidly. "There has been a big increase in entry-level everyday wine consumption," says Mr Lai, indicating the switch to a more private consumption-driven market.

FOOD AND WINE PAIRING

An important topic on which Watson's Wine has helped educate consumers on is wine pairing. Matching wine with Western food is well established and well-documented: You select a white wine to pair with Western-style seafood, or a red wine to go with a red-meat dish. But what about Chinese cooking?

"The huge variety of different cooking styles across China requires more knowledge of the dish rather than just what ingredients are used," says Mr Lai. For example, a light red wine will be selected to pair with Shanghai-style fried crab with rice cake in heavy sauce. Or a low acidity, sweet rosé or white wine to go with a Sichuan-style poached beef in chilli soup, rather than the traditional matching of a red wine with red meat. "We need to consider more factors when we do wine pairing to match the more diverse and complex flavours of Chinese food," continues Mr Lai.

It is not just the cooking method that differentiates Chinese cuisine from the traditional food and wine-pairing culture. The Chinese market for wines also typically distinguishes between first-tier (e.g. Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou), second-tier (e.g. Changsha, Wuhan, Chengdu) and third-tier cities (e.g. Urumqi).

The first-tier city consumers are quite knowledgeable about wine. "We are already seeing wine being the first choice, replacing baijiu or spirits at dinner functions," says Mr Lai. This is no doubt due, in part, to the efforts of Watson's Wine.

Second- or third-tier cities, on the other hand, can be quite different. Customers in these cities usually share a number of different wines over a traditional Chinese round table meal instead of pairing separate glasses with each course.

Watson's Wine has also organised guided food and wine-pairing sessions through its education team, helping customers maximise the enjoyment of fine wines with their meals. During these wine events, the host will take the lead throughout a meal and each course will come with a pre-assigned fresh glass of wine. The host will explain the rationale behind each selection, such as the right combination of flavours and textures that would complement the course being served. An engaging Q&A discussion follows afterwards. "Our customers enjoy this as they are able to learn a lot," says Mr Lai.



Watson's Wine has trained professionals to guide customers through their inventory of over 6,000 wines and spirits.

THE ROADSHOW

Watson's Wine has been at the frontier of developing wine culture in second- and third-tier cities. After seeing that first-tier cities already had a wealth of wine exhibitions, the company began running roadshows in the second- and third-tier cities. "In these cities, consumers are less knowledgeable about wine, but interest is growing. Wine education remains the key to growing wine culture in these areas," Mr Lai adds.

These events provide a valuable opportunity to introduce the different brands and winemakers to second- and third-tier city consumers, and to discuss the qualities of different wines and wine pairing with local food.

At each of these roadshows, Watson's Wine invites representatives from some of the biggest wineries around the world to host booths and interact with customers. Visitors can go directly to the source for in-depth knowledge about the products they are sipping right at that moment, and can explore the flavour, the texture, or even the grapes or process the wine was made with. "This is an annual activity to bring wine culture to end consumers in second- and third-tier cities," explains Mr Lai.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Due to its dominant share of imported wines, French wine has traditionally been the first choice for new wine drinkers. As part of their mission to elevate wine culture, Watson's Wine tries to open the eyes of consumers to different and exciting possibilities. They introduce consumers to other wine regions outside of the dominant French selection, including European options like Italian and Spanish wines as well as New World options such as Chilean, Argentinean and Californian wines. "As consumers become more knowledgeable

about other wine options, we are seeing an influx of New World wines, particularly at the entry level," says Mr Lai.

But Watson's Wine can't claim all the credit, Mr Lai explains. "In general the market has been normalising in the past two years. Consumers are beginning to look for value for money rather than just picking out the most expensive wine on the list."

This hunt for value has led to more experimentation with non-French wines, helping fuel the growth of consumption of New World wines. Even dessert wines – such as Canada's icewine varietals – often have a bigger following in China than their home countries.

Experimentation must be paired with essential education from organisations like Watson's Wine. "With more education and understanding of wine being part of food, there will be many opportunities for pairings involving New World wines and white wines," says Mr Lai.

MATURING GRACEFULLY

While the Mainland has rapidly become the world's fifth-largest consumer of wine, wine culture there, like wine itself, will need time to age gracefully.

"This shift is not going to happen overnight. It takes time and effort by players like us to continue to drive the wine culture through the provision of more wine education and product training. The more informed the consumers become, the more confident they will be to choose their own wine for different occasions," says Mr Lai.

"This will continue to fuel both the growth of wine culture in the Mainland and opportunities for Watson's Wine." □

THE WHITE WINES

Baijiu is translated literally as "white wine", but the Chinese product is very different from its Western namesake. From its place in traditional culture and the way it is produced, to the way it interacts with your palate, the differences are immense.

As China's 'national drink', baijiu has been the traditional choice for state-level banquets. It is often enjoyed during family celebrations, business negotiations and holiday festivities, especially among second- and third-tier cities. Western wine, on the other hand, only began catching on in China in the past decade or so. White wine in particular has only just begun to grow in popularity among more sophisticated drinkers.

Baijiu is a distilled alcohol made from grain, generally with alcohol by volume (ABV) of 40–60 per cent. It is normally served at room temperature in a small ceramic bottle, and then poured into a small cup or shot glass. Western white wine, however, is made through the fermentation of grapes, with a maximum ABV of 15 per cent, and, unlike red wines, the juice of the grape is separated from the skin before fermentation.

The flavour of white wine ranges from dry to sweet, and it must be chilled to be in the best condition for drinking, although it must not be served with ice. Baijiu on the other hand, represents an entire category of spirits, and its flavour depends on the choice of grain or proportions used. But no matter what variation, the drink can be strong, somewhat fiery and, to the uninitiated, sometimes quite unpleasant.

With the wine market booming rapidly and wine becoming increasingly popular in China, the Chinese now have white wines for all occasions. Gan bei! (Cheers!)

