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WSJ.com

EXCURSIONS | OCTOBER 16, 2009, 8:50 P.M. ET

In Hong Kong, Stirrings of a Serious Wine Scene

By JAKE LEE

For all the toothsome crabs and delicate siu mai that make Hong Kong one of the world's best places to eat, until recently wine was largely enjoyed more as a marker of status than as a complement to a meal. Wine programs and shops in the city's main district catered to local tycoons and expatriates with a taste for Bordeaux and expense accounts to match.

But venues for wine—shops, tasting bars and even a winery—now flourish in the city, thanks to a happy convergence of factors that includes reduced taxes and a government mandate declaring 2009 "Food & Wine Year". Auction houses are clamoring to sell fine Bordeaux, Burgundies and Barolos and ever more restaurants are hosting dinners with wine makers flown in for the occasion. Tasting events, trade shows and oenology courses abound. A recent Sotheby's auction of two American-owned wine collections raised \$7.9 million, almost 30% more than estimated.

Still, many of the best and most interesting sites are tucked away, often a short taxi ride out of central Hong Kong.

Crown Wine Cellars is one such place, housed in an underground former World War II ammunition depot on the green and spacious south side of the island.

Technically a private club, the cellar opens on to the public on the third Saturday of every month, inviting visitors to tour subterranean passageways where defused 55-pound shells share shelf space with some of city's finest bottles. Call up and play your cards right to finagle a complimentary one-day membership, which allows you to book a table in the dining room, decorated in World War II bric-a-brac as well as ancient bottles of Chinese rice wine.

"We're right in the middle of nowhere, at the backside of a mountain and in the middle of a forest," says Crown's managing director, Greg De'eb, who notes that the cellar is for history buffs as well as wine connoisseurs.

"There's no mobile phone reception down here, so it's also an escape."

Still more sweet talk may get you invited to Tuesday Night Club, a weekly gathering in Crown's ornate library, where members and guests swap wine stories and share bottles both from the house menu and members' own collections. Guests must purchase a bottle from the house wine list—bottles start from 98 Hong Kong dollars for a Sauvignon Blanc—while members can purchase or bring a bottle of their own to share. On the evening I attended, a member brought a prized 1982 Chateau Dauzac to share; top South African wines also make frequent appearances during these evenings, given Mr. De'eb's previous role as South Africa's acting consul in Hong Kong.

Nearby, on the third floor of an ugly industrial building in Ap Lei Chau, is Hong Kong's only winery, **8th Estate**. The winery makes bottles from frozen grapes shipped from Washington state and Italy. On Saturdays, visitors gather in the winery's large, sleek barrel room to taste wines ranging from Gewürztraminer to Nebbiolo. (A taste of four varietals runs HK\$60 (\$7.74 USD).)

"For those that haven't seen a winery, it's a chance to get their feet wet," says 8th Estate's managing director Lysanne Tusar. "Drinking is just the tip of iceberg."

Some Hong Kong restaurants in the buzzy Soho area are beginning to stock 8th Estate's wines, and the company regularly teams up with wine educators for courses and tastings. The winery also holds regular 'taste-offs', which pit 8th Estate wines against such well-known vintages as Bordeaux first-growth Chateau Margaux. Recent events have ranged from a reasonable HK\$395 (\$51) to a pricey HK\$1500 (\$193).

Hong Kong's restaurant of the moment, **Cépage**, also reigns supreme as the city's top wine destination. The wine list here contains 2,400 selections, and a vast collection of magnums from France, including many vintages of Bordeaux's finest first-growth wines, and Burgundy classics like the 1988 La Tache, that appeals to local wine collectors.

About a third of diners here choose their bottle first, then seek the sommelier's advice to select dishes to match, with a recent focus on matching food with more unusual wines like Lebanon's Château Musar and various Austrian Grüner Veltliners.

Customers keep their chauffeurs waiting outside as they splurge on wine and a HK\$1380 (\$178) seven-course evening tasting menu. Regulars store their 1978 Petrus and other vintage bottles in one of the restaurant's two glass-walled cellars. Though dinner for two can cost upwards of HK\$3000 with wine, Cépage draws a growing number of mainland Chinese with sophisticated tastes, says restaurant manager Bernard Mak.

"The way they swirl, add oxygen into their palate, they really know their stuff," he says.

A more lighthearted—and lightly priced—night out can be found across town at **Tastings**, a wine bar off Lan Kwai Fong, Central's main drinking and nightlife district. At the bar, a range of 40 vintages from around the world are dispensed from sleek metal Enomatic machines that allow customers to select how much they'd like to taste, from a sip up to a full glass. This encourages patrons to experiment and try unfamiliar varieties.

"People are looking for wines they've never had, rather than looking for wines that will give them face," or reputation, says director Charlene Dawes. "One of the highest sellers is the Gewürztraminer. Even if people can't say the name, they can still get the lychee flavors and they like it."

The interiors are quirky and cozy—giant, cloudlike bunches of cotton hang from the ceiling, and large stones cover the walls. Customers can pay from HK\$16 (\$7) for a sip of a Rhone Syrah from 2007 up to a blowout HK\$980 (\$126) dollars for a glass of The Harlan Estate Red, a 1998 Napa vintage.

A more traditional aesthetic is found at **Berry Bros. & Rudd**'s shop, the U.K.'s oldest wine merchant and official supplier to the British royal family.

Adorned with detailed wine maps and centuries-old bottles, the shop frequently flies in experts—some of whom have achieved the Master of Wine qualification—to lead tastings and master classes. Burgundy resident and leading authority on the area Jasper Morris visited earlier this year as did Alun Griffiths, the former wine buyer for Harrods and Fortnum and Mason's in London. The shop stocks such rare bottles as a 1945 Château Mouton Rothschild, priced at HK\$248,000 (\$32,000), but also carries HK\$60 (\$7) bottles of house red. This is a good spot for finding a bottle to bring to one of the city's famed private kitchens, which serve set menus of regional Chinese or other world cuisines and charge no corkage fees.

Hong Kong drinkers increasingly want to learn about wines, said James Owen, Berry Bros.'s fine wine manager. "We're seeing a lot more young professionals, usually educated overseas and [who] have picked up knowledge," he says.

There's no escaping the bias here towards so-called old world wines that have history and tradition on their side but serious interest in the newer regions is rising, especially nearby Australia.

Hong Kong is even looking very tentatively towards China, which is beginning to grow wine grapes, and airline Cathay Pacific now carries a mainland red wine from Grace Vineyards. Some enterprising restaurants in the city are starting to tackle a big unknown, matching wines from the West with China's multitude of cuisines, from the mouth-numbing spice of Szechuan dishes to the widely textured Cantonese food.

Berry Bros. recently tapped further into the changing Hong Kong market, publishing a list of wines deemed suitable with the mooncakes traditionally eaten during the mid-Autumn festival. According to Berry Bros., the cakes, filled with lotus seed paste and the yolks of salted duck eggs, pair well with sweet oloroso sherry or a non-vintage champagne.

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