

## UNDERSTANDING TASTE AND EXPECTATION OF WINE CONSUMERS IN ASIAN MARKETS

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### **NO SUCH THING AS A "TYPICAL" ASIAN CONSUMER – TASTE IS VERY DIVERSE IN ASIA**

There is, for better or for worse, no such thing as a typical Asian consumer. Indians are different from Chinese; Koreans from Japanese; Singaporeans from Malaysians; and Thais from Indonesians.

Even within a country, people from the north are different from the south; east from west; those living on the coast or near water very different from others whose homes are more inland.

In olden days, and even till today, people who live near the sea tend to have more economic and trading opportunities including more chances to migrate than those who live in the interior. Because of their geography, even the food they eat are very different from those closer to the sea and river who enjoy more fish and seafood and, because of the greater range of ingredients, create many more ways of cooking them: from raw to steaming to stir-frying, while those living more inland tend to consume more meats. Even the meats they like can be very different.

In China, for example, Beijingers in the north love their roast duck while Shanghainese in the south prefer their chicken. Northerners prefer to eat noodles, buns and breads while those in the south rice is the staple because it is easy to grow.

China and India, between them comprising half the world's population of 1.3 and 1.2 billion respectively are two of the most diverse countries in the world where not only are there many different regional cuisine within the two countries, there are different dialects, even languages. India, for example, has more than 100 different languages, each with its own distinct script and writing.

### **CHINA**

In China, the birthplace of tea, people in the north prefer the partly fermented oolong tea to the unfermented green tea which is the favourite in Shanghai. Shanghai, in the middle of China and everything below it, is considered the south. Yet, although it prefers green tea, if you move even further south to the provinces of Fukien and Guangdong and even farthest south to Hong Kong, Chinese people there prefer oolong and black teas, just like in the north. Why? Who knows? It's the Chinese Paradox.

When you visit Asia, whether China, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and Singapore, don't be fooled when you see so many MacDonalds and Starbucks and start thinking that people eat and drink the same things. Your eyes are merely drawn to familiar sights. If you only look at that you will miss the bigger picture.

It's true that people have been affected by globalization but take a closer look also at the unfamiliar and you will discover an ocean of diversity in regional cuisine and their many different dishes.

Asia is not like America where all the supermarkets sell the same perfectly shaped banana with no taste, the same peanut butter and jelly jam, the same Ben & Jerry ice-cream, the same Heinz tomato ketchup, and the same cheese wrapped in plastic with no cheese taste called Kraft.

Because Asians love many different types of food, our taste buds are much more complex than American taste. So, when you produce wines that are different and diverse, the Asian palate can potentially appreciate it. However, this does not mean that they can understand it. It's like someone who does not know tea and discover that there are 5 different groups of teas and that within those 5 groups, there are many more different teas.

***DIVERSITY IN TASTE FOR FOOD BUT WHEN IT COMES TO WINE, CONFUSION SETS IN BECAUSE IT IS A RELATIVELY NEW BEVERAGE***

The Asian palate has no problem appreciating nuances in taste and layers of flavours because of our exposure to so many different cuisine, ingredients, dishes and foods but when it comes to wine, even though our tastebuds are sophisticated, because wine is something new, most consumers are puzzled and confused that there are so many types and brands of wines including different varietals; single varietal and blends; oaked and unoaked; vintage and non-vintage; Old and New World; and so on.

This is not surprising because wine is a relatively new product and also because, and let's be very honest, wine being a necessity of life, unless someone is very enthusiastic, they don't really bother to find out more.

***EXPECTATIONS***

To speak of Asian wine consumers having "expectations" concerning wine is to imagine that Asians are thinking a lot about wine in the first place. This is not the situation. Except for people who have been more exposed to wine in the first place, an Asian's expectation of wine is usually that a wine should, when one drinks it, reminds something of the grape. This is not usually the case except in the most obviously fruity wine, Moscato being perhaps the prime example.

So, if you were trying to demonstrate or impress a new Asian consumer with the taste of wine, he or she will be more impressed with a Moscato or Muscat than with a Greco di Tufo or Puligny-Montrachet. For the same reason, a Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc would be the preferred wine to a Soave. That is the first impression because people who have never had wine before expect it to be fruity. But not necessarily sweet. However, if you had a very oaky wine and one that is sweet, chances are that the first-time wine drinker will prefer sweet, not because they like it sweet but more because they did not expect the taste of wood in wine.

Fruit is the key rather than sweetness.

***EDUCATION IS MAIN KEY***

But remember what I said about Asian consumers being able to appreciate nuances and subtlety. So, if you take the trouble to show them something fruity first and after that demonstration, beginning with an explanation go on to show something more subtle, most consumers can accept the more subtle wine. And with time, probably even enjoy it.

This information you offer to the consumer is education.

A wine producer who is in it for the long term, who sees wine as a life-long passion and not just one of several career options or another product to get involved in, such a dedicated person must surely know that education is the key to understanding.

If you are willing to invest in the best possible education for your children, why wouldn't you also invest in ways to educate the young wine drinker, by "young" I mean of course "new" wine drinker. With time, you help the consumer graduate, evolve and mature into life-long customers.

The situation would be exactly the same if I was trying to introduce a Westerner to Chinese cuisine for the first time. I would never think of starting with steamed doufu or steamed fish because it would be too subtle and delicate. Instead, I know that it would be easier to impress the newcomer

to Chinese cuisine with deep-fried Cantonese spring roll and Beijing roast duck. It will take quite a while before the beginner to Chinese cuisine can graduate to the subtlety of steamed doufu and steamed fish.

Sensitivity to delicate things, whether wine, music, poetry, painting or philosophy is cultivated with time, education and perhaps most important of all, an originally sensitive spirit because if you did not have that in the first place, no amount of time or education can penetrate the thick wall of insensitivity. This is the reason why I think that of all the different peoples in the world, Americans are probably the only ones who cannot appreciate tea. There are, I believe, two reasons for that. One is because the taste of tea is one of the most delicate in the world. The other reason is because great teas are always served without sugar.

### **MARKETING IS NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION**

Consumers, not just Asian consumers, but every black and white, yellow and brown, tall and short, round and lean, hairy and bald, good-looking or like me, all consumers appreciate information on something, anything, that we know very little about.

I realize, of course, that not every producer has the time to stand behind a table and pour wines for the public to taste. It may not be practical for some of you, especially the big brands, to do that.

There are, as you all know better than I do, other ways to reach out to your target consumer.

An attractive label always helps. Useful information whether on the front or the back of the bottle can go some way to prepare the consumer for what to expect when the wine is open. The label may simply say "Chardonnay" or "Cabernet Sauvignon", "Coonawarra" or "Cool Climate" but already, the label has helped identify a certain taste and expectation. The label can also try and promise reliability whether the name is "Antinori" or "Torres", "Penfolds" or "Montes". The label can also suggest superior quality whether "DOCG" or "DOC", "Riserva" or "Cru Classe de Medoc 1855".

But it seems to me, that everything about the label is the cart and not the horse. You put the cart behind you but you are the driving force because the bottle on its own cannot make the move.

I don't mean to sound surreal but what I am trying to get at is that education – your end of the bargain to your new or seasoned Asian consumer – in whichever well-thought out ways and strategy you decide and determine, is the master key to winning your customers over. Marketing, however slick, can never be a substitute for a well-produced wine. Maybe you need a lot of marketing to launch a TV reality show where you expect the audience to have an even smaller brain than the actors, but marketing alone can never save a bad wine. If you think it can, then you need more saving than the bad wine.

The text-book example of perhaps the most desperate marketing wine campaign in the world was when Lindemanns, at that time not yet part of the Foster's Group, used Jackie Chan to promote their wines in a campaign called "Among Friends".

A speck of dust has more brainy grey matter than that because even a die-hard Jackie Chan fan realizes that while it may make sense for the gongfu star to endorse sports equipment, he had no track record in wine appreciation. Unfortunately, and ironically, the person who thought up of that idea was an Asian. But his employers were dumb enough to follow his blind lead.

Asian consumers, like consumers everywhere in the world, expect integrity from the people who produce the things they drink, eat, wear, read and watch, except maybe reality TV shows and American wrestling.

### **BE AWARE OF CULTURAL IDIOSYNCRACIES**

All cultures have do's, don't's and taboos. Asia is no exception and Asians appreciate people who are sensitive to their culture.

Asians are very touched when foreigners make the attempt to say "Good Evening Ladies & Gentlemen" in the local dialect or language. If you are in Japan, you have to switch the order and say instead "Good Evening Gentlemen & Ladies". But even if you got the order wrong, if you said those few words in the local language, you will be well-liked. And remembered for a long time if you also say "Thank You Very Much" like the locals.

Just as "13" is an unlucky number for Westerners, never put a Chinese in Room 14 or 24 or, God help you, 44. Room 8 and 28 will make you very popular. Which is why Penfolds has Bin 8 and 128 and Wyndham Estate has Bin 888 Merlot. "8" has the same sound as "Prosper" while "4" reminds of the sound of "Death". If, for example, you go to the "Fook Lam Moon" Cantonese restaurant at the Shangri-La Pudong Shanghai, you will see that they have a lot of red Bordeaux of the 1988 vintage including Mouton-Rothschild and Petrus.

Thirty years ago, a German company tried to reproduce the success of Blue Nun Liebfraumilch. They came up with a brand called "Seagull". Except it didn't sell, especially in Hong Kong. The reason was because the sound of "Seagull" in Cantonese means "Dead Prick".

When you go out to Asia to host tastings, dinners or other presentations, never pat or touch the head of an Asian. It is considered very, very rude. Or put your feet on another person's seat. Or play with your chopsticks imagining you were Ringo Starr on the roof of Apple Studios in Abbey Road. Would you, for example, play with your fork and knife at dinner?

### **USE LOCAL EXAMPLES TO COMMUNICATE**

Try and offer local examples when talking about wine.

So, if you want to explain that terroir is very important in producing a great wine, use local examples that the Asian consumer can understand such as that Darjeeling, at the foothills of the Himalayas, produces much finer tea than Assam even though their plant material is the same and had originated from China. Or that the best dried raisins and honey melons come from Xinjiang in the desert north-west which was originally part of the Silk Road than from anywhere else in China.

You will also be more effective in selling your wine if you explained the taste, texture, body, weight and personality of your wine by again using local examples and analogies. For example, your wine is fine and subtle like Tang poetry or Tang porcelain; your wine is light and elegant like fish soup over mutton stew; your wine is full of intensity and depth like Beijing Opera, not "Desperate Housewives"; your wine is the product of a great tradition, culture and civilization such as India and China.

Asian consumers are very sentimental and romantic. And generally friendly to foreigners. But you have to learn how to win their friendship. It's not very difficult if you take the trouble to spend some time outside the 5-star hotels and hotel restaurants – whether Western or Chinese – and simply go out into the streets and walk around. When you soak in the local flavours, you find yourself being able to describe your own wines with a new perspective.

### **LOCAL FOOD PLEASE**

Please avoid going out all the way to Asia to tell Asians that Italian wine go very well with Italian food or that French wine is great with brasserie food. Asians assume that already and you can actually save yourself an expensive and time-consuming trip by just emailing or texting us that information. If you want to sell more wines in Asia, you have to show Asians that your wine,

whatever their nationality or regionality, are delicious with the food that Asians eat everyday. Not a French or Italian meal that Asians eat, maybe, once in a month.

Make the extra effort to show us how your wine can accommodate Asian food. And if you have to use an interpreter, try and get someone who has a feeling, understanding and love for wine. It can make a big difference.

Most Asians, except maybe the Japanese who tend to be very intense, are very pragmatic and practical people. The Chinese are probably the most versatile and will adapt any and everything to their own pleasure. Cognac, and now increasingly whisky, is the greatest example where instead of drinking it as an aperitif or digestive, the Chinese knock it back throughout a 2, 3-hour meal and at the Karaoke or nightclub. Even wine is now consumed in Karaoke lounges and nightclubs although the vast majority of it is enjoyed with food. Asian food please.