



## THE PERFECT MATCH

Food and wine pairings can be fairly tricky, especially when the cuisine is eastern in origin. The China House, The Oriental Bangkok, showed it can be done and with panache; they off-set Chinese cuisine with German wines. Neetinder Dhillon was there for the experience.

Wine with Chinese food no longer raises eyebrows but a comfort-level with the pairing still remains to be established. If you have played safe by opting for a sweet Gewurztraminer, it is time to let go of your security blanket and experiment. There are nuances to Chinese food that need to be exploited and limiting yourself to one wine is just not the way to go. It is time to look at the fine distinctions within the Chinese culinary tradition and exploit or develop on them with a choice of wine.

The China House, The Oriental Bangkok and Fin (wine importers) put their combined talents together for a seven-course dinner that played on these very nuances. The result was in a word 'astonishing'. The wines were German; from the Wittmann estate (Rheinhessen) fronted by Philip Wittmann, with one wine from Weingut Ansgar Clusserath (Bernkastel, Mosel) represented at the dinner by winemaker Eva Clusserath. On an aside, Phillip and Eva were recently married.

To be honest there is nothing revo-

lutionary about drinking wine with Chinese; I have always been comfortable with ordering a wine and drinking it with my Chinese (shared) meal, essentially sticking to the same bottle for the duration. Most diners tend to do this. And this was not my first wine dinner based on Chinese food but it was the first where the cuisine, though very traditional, had been successfully transplanted in the Western tradition of a course meal. A difficult thing to do with a cuisine essentially meant for the family with the emphasis on 'sharing' and on multiplicity of dishes offered.

A course meal [with Chinese food] is a double-edged sword: While the biggest hurdle of dealing with a wide variety of meats, seafood and vegetables on a single table is taken care of by turning it into a course meal; it all but destroys the essence of a Chinese meal – something to be shared family style. But this course meal managed to bring in this very vital ingredient with great success. Also this was certainly the first time the West and the East did

not come across as 'strange bedfellows', trying to get on with it for the sheer challenge of it. This time round things were different, it was a marriage made in heaven.

Appropriately titled 'Universe Of Prosperity Wine Dinner' it was a great way to usher in the Chinese New Year. The table setting in minimalist black and white was perfect; the fiery red walls of the private room added all the colour one needed.

The first two courses effectively brought in the element of sharing but with a twist. It was 'The Symbol of New Year Prosperity' or salmon sashimi in Chinese Style 'Yu Sheng' served with 2006 Wittmann Gutsriesling QbA Trocken. This dish of raw fish (usually salmon) and shredded vegetables is always served at New Year to usher in prosperity and is loaded with meaning and flavours.

The symbolic salad with salmon was presented on a huge platter and then taken away to be tossed and individually served. The fresh vegetables adding the crunch and the dressing based on plum sauce completing the picture. The Riesling with its fruity nose of melon and apricot and a pronounced mineral tone, was dry with lively acidity and a good finish. Because of its popularity Wittmann refers to it as his 'liquid business card'. An easy drinking wine, it is a basic dry Riesling that works well with salmon and had



enough acidity to handle the sweetness of the dressing.

The second course 'The Five Essential Elements for Life', was a platter reflecting the five elements: Gold (Sautéed bird's nest with egg white with gold leaf), Wood (Tea smoked bean curd skin rolled with assorted vegetables and mushrooms), Water (Steamed assorted mushroom parcel with Chinese cabbage leaf served with supreme oyster sauce), Fire (Honey glazed barbecued pork 'Cha Siew' & roasted tomato skewers) and Earth (Braised homemade spinach tofu with crisp mushroom sautéed with light soy ginger sauce). Tying the varied flavours together was 2004 Gutswein Scheurebe QbA Trocken, Wittmann.

The second course paid homage to the variety usually plated at a Chinese table but as individual servings. Each bite-size offering opening a new window into the culinary traditions of China and each despite the varied flavour profiles making room for the wine paired with it. Labelled as a great alternative to the Sauvignon Blanc the Scheurebe was bursting with fruity aromas primarily passionfruit. Very fresh, very structured and beautifully balanced it had a fine mineral tone and vigorous acidity. Each element of the dish helped open up the wine further. As it does not have too much alcohol, it makes for easy drinking.

Course number three was Yunnan ham and spinach soup with fresh crabmeat paired with 2004 Silvaner 'S' Trocken QbA, Wittmann, and Rheinhessen, Germany. The soup an absolute delight, the spinach, not pureed, but finely chopped added texture while the chorizo-like flavour of the Yunnan sausage gave it bite. The crabmeat, delicately poached, added another dimension to the basic but well-flavoured broth, which formed the background to the dish. The wine was soft, almost creamy in the mouth with great minerality. Long with great balance, it makes for an almost opulent mouthful

with clear acidity. For those interested Robert Parker gave this one 91 points. Four-fifths of Wittmann's Silvaner is sold in Germany and most of the rest within Europe, so it is not easy to come by this gem. Silvaner, though Germany's third most planted white grape is way, way behind Riesling and Muller-Thurgau in acreage. It is rarely to be found in exported German wine.

Next on was Oven-roasted 'Peking' goose with 2006 Piesporter Goldtropfchen Riesling Spatlese, Ansgar Clusserath (Mosel). The goose replaced the duck but otherwise was as traditional as it comes: enfolded in a delicate pancake were crispy skin, cucumber, spring onions and sauce. The second part of this dish was diced goose meat accompanied by a broth. The wine reflected the slate soil: a crisp, sweet white which cellar master Eva tells me ages remarkably well. It has a creamy mellow start, followed by a fresh acidity that enhances the fruity notes (think grapefruit, peach, apricots) and has a long, mineral-rich finish.

The fish (the first main) course 'Steamed garoupa fillet with ginger paste' came in a lotus leaf parcel paired with a Wittmann 2002 Westhofener Riesling "S" QbA Trocken that is rich on well developed aromas. Very elegant, rich with notes of passionfruit and peach, offset by a lively acidity. A medium-bodied wine it has a lingering finish and a minerality that takes on the ginger head to head. The garoupa beautifully steamed to a flakiness used

the ginger as a perfect spice element. The soya dipping sauce was almost superfluous.

With the next course came the first red of the evening: a robust Wittmann, 2005 Spatburgunder Rotwein Trocken 'S'. The dish in question: oven-baked lamb rack marinated with Oriental spices. The lamb was perfectly grilled and the pinot noir (Blauer Spatburgunder) handled the spices with finesse. All of Wittmann's 'S' wines are crafted from grapes that have been selectively harvested by hand. This one is rich with fine tannins and more than a hint of berries. It has distinctive mouth, long finish and reflects an elegant burgundy though the colour is lighter.

To close the meal was a very interesting take on a typical Chinese dessert of sago and melons. This one had the tapioca pearls suspended in a mango puree with pomelo, dragon fruit and strawberry chunks bulking it out. The whole served in a hollowed out dragon fruit. Obviously it was back to a white with this: Wittmann 2006 Riesling Auslese Westhofener Morstein. A light sweet wine that would work perfectly as a dessert in itself. Lots of fruit combined with a fine acidity, long, finish and lingering freshness. The first taste is of mango followed by passionfruit as it is not too powerful, it makes a great companion for most sweet offerings.

The perfect end to a great meal. Try the wines and the food at The China House yourself and you'll realise that every nuance of Chinese cuisine needs to be exploited with an appropriate wine. ■

