

According to a survey released last week, customers at Hong Kong's top 65 restaurants can choose from an average of 270 wines, more than half of them French. Some 40 per cent of those wines will be from Burgundy and Bordeaux while five of the top 10 producers are from Champagne.

The survey, by digital wine list developer Entaste also reveals that Hong Kong restaurateurs don't like sweet wines – only 60 per cent carried any at all and of those that were carried more than half are priced at HK\$4,000 or more and a quarter at HK\$16,000 or more.

It seems that the restaurateurs are more conservative than their customers when matching food and wine.

Master of wine Debra Meiburg says, "We've noticed a gradual shunning of traditional Western ideas about pairing and increasing experimentation. Pairing wine with Asian cuisines is still a very young field, but its proponents are starting to feel confident enough in their own palates to move beyond the tenets of Western pairing and the commercially motivated suggestions of winemakers to discover for themselves which combinations amplify the dining experience and which are to be avoided."

The new-found adventurousness is a far cry from when Hongkongers first started drinking wine in numbers, in the 1990s.

One of the influences of British rule in Hong Kong was the wine pairing philosophy of the time. A rudimentary approach of white wine with fish or chicken, red with beef, and a sickly sweet wine with dessert, which expats applied to the local cuisine despite it often being an inappropriate match. Hong Kong Chinese did not begin to drink wine until the '70s and then it was only a handful of overseas-educated Chinese. The favoured Western tipple, from the '60s through to early '90s, to pair with Cantonese food by the locals was cognac, and of course beer, with the former only drunk on



Clockwise from left: steamed dumplings; egg tarts topped with bird's nest; roast duck; steamed chicken; braised beef brisket with noodles. Photos: May Tse, K.Y. Cheng, Jonathan Wong



## Cantonese food doesn't need full-bodied whites ... Its delicate flavours are overwhelmed when served with full-flavoured wines

DEBRA MEIBURG, MASTER OF WINE

special occasions or when wanting to impress. As a result, there was little change in habits until recently.

"The cliché of drinking cognac with Cantonese food is true, especially at Chinese wedding banquets, with a bottle of XO placed on each table, but that has changed a hell of a lot in the last 20 years," says Simon Tam, Christie's head of wine, China. The change began in the early '90s when more Hong

Kong Chinese began to drink red wine for its health benefits, coupled with more wine exposure (through travel, work or expat friends). It came to be seen as a status symbol to rival cognac, with a preference for high-end reds from Bordeaux.

Red wines' textures and tannins are claimed to match Cantonese cuisine.

Peter Gago, chief winemaker for Australian producer Penfolds, who has travelled to Hong Kong for business many times since the mid-90s, thinks the red preference is tied into tea. "The Chinese celebrate a tea-drinking culture, perhaps the preference has arisen from tannins, which are also present in tea."

"One might suggest that Chinese cuisine is one of many textures, and that red wines generally have more robust texture. There are a number of Cantonese dishes that might be complemented by white wines

but there are some historic barriers, notably a resistance to cold drinks, thought to disrupt digestion," says Amanda Parker, general manager of Berry Bros. & Rudd's Fine Wine Centre. Wine producers from Alsace have tried a number of times to introduce a shift in the wine pairing scene to the region's whites. They first tried to promote their dry rieslings and aromatic gewürztraminers as perfect matches about 12 years ago. The push largely failed, especially with gewürztraminer, due to a lack of understanding of the cuisine. They spoke of the wines being a great match for spicy food by balancing out the heat, although spiciness is not a hallmark of Cantonese cuisine.

Armed with increased knowledge about the cuisine, another push about five years ago was more successful, especially with rieslings, but still failed to sway local wine drinkers away from their beloved reds.

Meiburg says, "Cantonese food doesn't need full-bodied whites to balance it out. Its delicate flavours are usually overwhelmed when served with round, full-flavoured wines."

The most recent change in the pairing story has two parts. On the one hand, there is an increasing number of people with knowledge of the cuisine drinking more wine, with some becoming experts. This has led to an increase in wine columns in Chinese-language publications. The writers are able to use their knowledge of both the food and wine to educate drinkers on how to go about selecting wine pairings. Gago says: "There has been a solid interest in fine wine in Hong Kong for some time. It is more overt now than a decade ago, especially with the increase in Asian wine critics writing articles and books on food and wine pairing. For example, Jeannie Cho Lee's *Asian Palate*, Lau Chi Sun's *Wine Now* magazine and Simon Tam's app, *Flavour Colours*."

Second, the lowering of the wine duty to zero in 2008 meant a wider selection of wines on the market. Wine drinkers began to experiment with pairings and in response Chinese restaurants began to offer the diner more choices, including wines by the glass. Some outlets employed sommeliers. Wine dinners became popular as a way to learn more and winemakers began to understand more about the nuances of the cuisine and which of their wines actually work with Cantonese food.

There has also been an increase in wine auctions, which Tam feels is facilitating a renaissance in drinking wine with Cantonese cuisine. "Wine auctions are bringing to the market the best wines, not the most expensive but the best, including wines that were not previously available. Cantonese cuisine has stayed largely the same but what has evolved is the availability of wine." foodandwine@scmp.com

## Acquire your own taste: red, white or even two at a time

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Master of wine Jeannie Cho Lee has a top five list for pairing with Cantonese food: new world pinot noir, premier cru Burgundy red, Loire valley whites, German whites and non-vintage champagne. With regards to banquets, she says because of the sequencing of dishes the best option is "to serve two wines at a time: a red and a versatile white or sparkling wine. This also offers the diner the opportunity to experiment matching the two wines with different dishes."

Peter Gago patriotically suggests the Australian grenache shiraz



Peter Gago

mourvedre (GSM) blend or shiraz on its own, neither aged in new oak. He's also a fan of Adelaide Hills chardonnay and gewürztraminer.

Amanda Parker says typical contemporary matches are a crisp chardonnay from Adelaide Hills with dim sum, a red Burgundy with Peking duck, and a Beerenauslese, a late-harvest wine from Germany, with desserts, such as egg tarts. Parker says that, when selecting only one wine to match multiple dishes, the crux is in choosing a versatile wine with characteristics to match the range and style of food. "Pinot noir is often a popular choice as it generally has good fruit concentration, doesn't display overly high tannins and has good acidic balance. There's enough character in the wine to complement beef dishes, good acidity to complement stir-fried dishes that have a high oil content, and is not so powerful that it would overwhelm fish dishes."

Debra Meiburg thinks a Cantonese meal is far too complicated to try to pair a wine to every dish. "The idea should be to pick a single special dish on the table



Amanda Parker

– for example, braised abalone – to match with the wine and serve that dish with that wine; particularly for whites with little oak influence, the wine should still be able to pair to a greater or lesser degree with most courses on the table. For the rest of the courses, there is tea."

Meiburg's pairing philosophy centres on the sauces. "Chinese cuisine, which tends to be strongly sauce and garnish driven, calls for a pairing system that looks first at the sauce that forms the flavour base of the dish," she says. For lighter,

aromatic sauces, she suggests lighter white wines that are dry or very lightly off-dry such as riesling or light-bodied grüner veltliners. Reds, such as pinot- and grenache-based wines she says usually fare well with darker soy-based sauces and black bean sauces. For lovers of French red wines, she suggests wines from Burgundy over Bordeaux, which tend to match only with the darkest and richest sauces.

"Gewürztraminer can actually be paired with Cantonese dishes that have enough flavour intensity to stand up to this bombshell." This includes dishes with sauces such as oyster, hoisin and chilli.

Simon Tam says: "There is no rule that says you can't have more than one glass at a time. I often serve more than one wine at the same time for a Cantonese banquet." He also has a novel pairing approach. "We eat seasonally in Hong Kong, so I feel pairing should be seasonal, too."

For example, steamed chicken eaten in summer is a natural pairing with a summery wine such as a riesling; in winter, when it would be natural to eat braised brisket, the

seasonal pairing is a warm, rich wine, such as an aged cabernet sauvignon. This led him to develop his *Flavour Colours* app, which divides dishes and wine into four colours (blonde, ivory, tan and brown). Diners simply match the dish colour with wines of the same colour. "A blonde wine is a fruity sauvignon blanc and a blonde dish is stir-fried scallops with ginger."

While these are some guidelines, the experts say don't be afraid to have fun and experiment. If it doesn't work, try something else.



Simon Tam. Photos: K.Y. Cheng, May Tse