

IN REVIEW:

Mini-Themes Dinner in Beijing and Hong Kong

6th February 2020

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One type of wine dinner I really love to host is "Mini Themes". Here, rather than creating a single broad horizontal or deep vertical theme to frame all the bottles for the evening, we break these ideas into flights – in tonight's case five. This approach has a few virtues. For a start, more variety of wine in an evening can lead to a bit more stimulation and discovery for the wine lover. It's also easier to develop a complementary menu, as the wine styles flow easily with the dish matches. The only guiding principle is that the combination of wines makes some narrative sense *within that flight*. It might be a vertical of one wine producer, a horizontal of a region... but I also like with these mini themes to pull together wines with something in common, but that we wouldn't otherwise connect at one dinner. Perhaps, from the art world we can create the term "wine diptychs".



Let's pause here for a moment to explore that source of inspiration. One of my favourite art books at home is one that accompanied Pace London's joint exhibition of paintings by Mark Rothko and photographic seascapes by Hiroshi Sugimoto. Two artists of two provenance in two different generations working in two different media, but the connection is strong. I love this sort of experience in wine. So tonight we will explore that too.

I hosted two dinners with identical wine flights – one in October at Mio at the Four Seasons Beijing, and one at La Rambla in Hong Kong. Both were such a lot of fun, great groups of enthusiasts attending and a wide range of wines (and relative food matching) to discuss on both nights.

My tasting notes and scores for the wines from both events follow separately – an illustration in itself of how the same wine (especially mature, even when very well sourced as our bottles were) can show differently, inspire different experiences, and for a wide range of reasons. I also include how each group – Beijing and Hong Kong – responded to my request that they vote for their top two wines of the night. (Spoiler alert – some results may surprise you).

We began the evenings somewhat classically with Piper Heidsieck's 'Rare', a cuvée de prestige that deserves in moniker – only nine vintages have been released in four decades. The first, from the 1976 vintage, was released in 1985 to celebrate the bi-centennial of Florens-Louis Heidsieck's presentation of "a cuvée worthy of a queen" to Marie-Antoinette in 1785. The blend for each has been 70% Chardonnay and 30% Pinot Noir.



2002 Champagne Piper Heidsieck 'Rare'

Beijing, 24/10/19

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A nutty autolytic sort of aroma – this has evolved a little now since its super fresh showings in recent years, good nose; vibrant on the palate with a nutty, citrusy taste, notes of marmalade and smoke, good depth of fruit. This is just entering the next phase of its development. Very good Champagne.

No votes for wine of the night.

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

Fresh vibrant and fruity nose, but now beginning to show a little bottle age – just beginning its evolution. Fresh and very well balanced on the palate. Impressive. *No votes for wine of the night.*

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1988 Champagne Piper Heidsieck 'Rare'

Beijing, 24/10/19

Full gold; an evolved nose, toasty with not much happening; much much better on the palate, with solid fruit, smoke, toasted brioche, fine acidity and length, good minerality.

No votes for wine of the night.

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

Deep gold; mature nose; ripe and tangy on the palate with an almost Ruwer Riesling-like 'coolness' – a distinctly verdant note that sits at odds with the ripe somewhat tired now fruit and faint hint of butterscotch. Good, and has complexity and depth but now on the fade.

One vote for wine of the night.



1976 Champagne Piper Heidsieck 'Rare'

Beijing, 24/10/19

Bright old gold, still good bubbles; toasty with notes of hazelnuts, ripe candied fruit, vibrant and lively; candied fruits and fruit compote, lots of concentration and vibrancy and seemingly 'younger' than the mature 1988. Long life ahead. Seriously impressive.

Four votes for wine of the night – 3rd place.

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

Fresh, vibrant, full of fruit, really well-defined acidity and shape to this wine. Although the cork came out with more of a faint hiss than a pop, it was stuck in super tight and the wine was perfectly fresh and lively. A really impressive bottle of Champagne. *Two votes for wine of the night.*

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Our first true 'diptych' within this mini-themes dinner was 1964: a bottle of Château Clos Fourtet from the St.-Émilion limestone plateau, recently released from the deep cellars of the estate, and incredibly rare bottles of Château Musar from the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon from a full original case we bought with exceptional provenance. The vintage 1964 is renowned for both places, so I was curious to see if they had something in common. Indeed that warmth, mellowed by age, came through in both. Serge, and his father Gaston Hochar had modelled Musar on Bordeaux (with a southern French twist) – Cabernet Sauvignon leading the blend, and Carignan and Cinsault in support, a Mediterranean climate, but with altitude (over 900m) to ensure freshness. Clos Fourtet occupies one of St.-Émilion's best positions, right up on the limestone plateau with 85% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Cabernet Franc. Neither bottle disappointed in either city.



1964 Château Musar

Beijing, 24/10/19

A light, fully-bricked appearance; at first this creaked a little on the nose showing the iron filings note I associate with decay, alongside an intense, sweet, and pleasant aroma of Terry's chocolate orange chocolate, spices and leather. Warm and inviting, the iron note blew off, and this really blossomed beautifully growing sweeter and sweeter in the glass. Sweet on the palate, with lovely fruit, tannins a touch rustic and dry, but this wine is alive and singing. *Five votes for wine of the night – 1st equal place.*

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

P.5

Bright old garnet rose colour; a sweet medicinal nose, sesame biscuits, rosehip, an inviting and intriguing and exotic nose; the palate was immediately sweet, medicinal, pure, with remarkable freshness and a very clear taste. Long, long finish is remarkable too. It just continued to improve until I could resist the last drops no more.

Six votes for wine of the night – 1st place.

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1964 Château Clos Fourtet

Beijing, 24/10/19

Bright, fully bricked but limpid in the glass; a sweet nose with a note of camphor initially, toffeed fruit, a little cedar, a sweet open aroma showing very little decay; sweet attack on the palate, old school firm grip from the tannins, soft pillowy texture on top of that, ripe and with good concentration. Drying a little now on the finish, but clean, graceful and fine. Lovely wine. *No votes for wine of the night.*

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

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Deeper garnet than the Musar; sweeter darker fruit too, with notes of currant jam; sweet dark fruit and spice lead on the palate, a touch of old leather, a fine chalky sort of texture, just a touch of balsamic. Really lovely lively fruit, sweet and long. *Two votes for wine of the night.*



Next diptych, two outside-of-France "first growths", both of which have been vinous ambassadors for their respective countries for decades, both of which – stylistically to my mind – are acid-driven rather than tannindriven. Both have traditionally demanded long-cellaring to see their virtues, and so here we had them in that almost universally great vintage, with a third of a century of age to their benefit, 1985 Vega Sicilia 'Unico' from Spain's Ribera del Duero, and 1985 Biondi Santi Brunello di Montalcino Riserva. Despite differences in *terroir* and blend, both are made in similar long-wood-ageing approaches and with similar goals for longevity in mind. I have often thought of them together. So, how did they show side by side? Well, yes, there are similarities, but the Unico is sweeter, lusher, bigger fruited and with the distinct aromatic note of American oak coming through. The Brunello sings at a higher register, the acidity more distinct here, and a little drier in texture, its flavour and aroma more subtle perhaps. Both appealed, but the difference was a little starker than I had expected.

1985 Biondi Santi Brunello di Montalcino Riserva

Beijing, 24/10/19

Bright bricked garnet; a more savoury sort of nose, old polished furniture, olive, leather and spice; a fine sinewy core of fruit, almost cranberry register, there is a sweet but sharp fruit taste, and taut feeling to the wine, juicy with good length, less sweet and full than the Unico. It worked especially well with the mushroom tagliatelle. *One vote for wine of the night.*

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

High-toned cool and bright on the nose; sharp and tangy on the palate, almost a sherberty sort of red on the attack, a complex middle, fresh, a subtle medicinal herb element and confit cherry tomatoes on the finish. With the monkfish served with a chicken jus this wine really came alive (thank you Tancredi Biondi Santi for the recommendation and thank you La Rambla for obliging!)

No votes for wine of the night.



1985 Vega Sicilia 'Unico'

Beijing, 24/10/19

A fine ruddy garnet, bricked rim; sweet and perfumed upper register (though the Brunello was higher still) nose with a distinct sweet old oak element, olive and florals; fine, elegant style on the palate, bright with juicy acidity, fine confit fruit, patisserie – even a marzipan-like edge to that... or more like Cantonese almond milk dessert. The bright intensity is tempered here by a more opulent luxuriant feel. Great wine.

Three votes for wine of the night. 2nd equal place.

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

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Bright full garnet; an exotically Asian spicy nose, sweet, savoury and very complex, olives and Cynar; sumptuous in texture, with very good acidity and flow, supple tannins, a good depth of fruit, and supple tannins, lots of complexity and a svelte finish. Drinking really well. In its prime.

Three votes for wine of the night. 2nd equal place.

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Next up, benchmark class Syrah/Shiraz, an iconic representation of the Hermitage classic, and the Australian response, in adjacent classic vintages. Both, in my experience, are easily capable of delivering vitality and complexity with 50 or more years in bottle. These two are in their drinking apogee: 1982 Paul Jaboulet Aîné Hermitage 'La Chapelle', and 1981 Penfold's Grange Hermitage. I like these wines in these particular vintages – '82 La Chapelle because it is an especially fragrant example, and '81 Grange perhaps because it wasn't a blockbuster vintage. In this vintage of Grange, there is a little more savouriness to counter the still grand sweet fruit and American oak. Both work but are a world apart figuratively and literally.

1982 Maison Paul Jaboulet Aîné Hermitage 'La Chapelle'

Beijing, 24/10/19

A clear bricked through appearance, tawny rim; a sweet, spicy, savoury nose, complex and evolved, meaty and wild; sweet on the palate, resolved, ample yet elegant, this is drinking perfectly now. Game and sweetness, wild herbs, quite low acid for a 'La Chapelle' of this era. Hard not to love this.

Five votes for wine of the night – 1st equal place.

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

Clear bright garnet, bricked rim; sweet nose, rosehip, garrigue; elegant and fine on the palate, lots of garrigue with a verdant edge (actually connecting it more than in Beijing to the Grange's eucalyptus note – a point that prompted plenty of discussion). Sweet, gamey and delicious.

Three votes for wine of the night. 2nd equal place.



1981 Penfolds Grange Hermitage

Beijing, 24/10/19

Still a fairly deep colour, with a bricked edge; a sweet medicinal nose, fruitcake and dried cherries; lush on the palate, sweet with a savoury biscuit-like edge, sesame, and the sweetness of the American oak hogsheads, some mint too and even a spearmint-like fragrance.

No votes for wine of the night.

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

Deep garnet; spicy sweet nose with a touch of eucalyptus; sweet, savoury, dark fruit and medicinal notes with eucalyptus in the mix.

Two votes for wine of the night.

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Finally, a beautifully elegant pair from 1953. These two, in their individual ways, show what fine fruit, botrytis, and fresh acidity can deliver, even after two thirds of a century.

1953 Château Doisy Daëne

One of my favourite Sauternes, with the elegance that comes naturally with its Barsac location. 80% Semillon, 20% Sauvignon Blanc. This 1953, which I have had about 4 or 5 times now recently, is wonderfully preserved, but lacks the depth of some of the other top vintages. Amazing value for money though, and every bottle I've had has been fine.

Beijing, 24/10/19

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Bright with a beautiful copper, spun gold appearance in the glass; sweet, citrus cream and butter cookies nose, some decay notes; elegant and rounded on the palate, mid-weight, bright, with demerara sugar and white plums on the finish, spices in the aftertaste. Elegant, bright and gently fading.

No votes for wine of the night.

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

Bright marmalade and caramel, barley sugar in the now dryish finish. Mid-weight. *No votes for wine of the night.*



1953 Domaine Huët Vouvray 'Le Mont' Moelleux 1er Trie

These two bottles from one of the last releases from Noël Pinguet, ex-domaine cellar stock, around 2013. We bought plenty, with now very little left. Get some to try while you can. The '1er trie' indicates a selected pick of botrytis berries early in the harvest, and usually regarded as the best of the crop, and usually the finest wine. This has more complexity and concentration than the Barsac in this diptych, but there is also a bit more variation – the Beijing bottle better than the HK one.

Beijing, 24/10/19

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Beautiful bright limpid old gold appearance; a low key waxy nose; the palate has great intensity and focus, full of fruit, notes of wax, and mineral, fine acidity, just a touch muted, but good nonetheless. *Two votes for wine of the night.*

Hong Kong, 17/01/20

Sweet and nutty, there is more oxidation present here than the Beijing bottle, lively and fairly rich, the flavours having become a little withered from the oxidation.

One vote for wine of the night.



Specially created dishes by Chef Ferran Tadeo and the team at La Rambla to pair with the wines at the dinner in Hong Kong

I enjoyed both events a great deal, and the format lent itself to a little more variety of discovery and discussion, as well as offering a foil for a wider range of dishes in each meal. I'd love to host some more like this if you are keen. If you are interested in organising your own 'diptychs' dinner, let us know, we'd be happy to help you select some wines, or perhaps help you host at The Fine Wine Experience – we can seat up to 24 in comfort with a full commercial kitchen for your chef (or we can arrange) out the back.

By the way, the dinner at La Rambla is so far my meal-of-the-year for 2020. Early days I know, but the quality there is exceptional, so do go check it out if you haven't been yet.



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