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Jan 9, 2005

# Generation Wine

## An increasing number of young people are turning to drinking and wine appreciation

By Serene Luo

ONCE a month, they meet to taste and compare wines, swirl them in glasses and swop pointers on the different characteristics of wine.



**THERE WERE FOUR DIFFERENT WINES for members at the NTU Wine Appreciation club's annual wine dinner at the Andora restaurant on Dec 29. -- BRYAN NEIL VAN DER BEEK**

But this is not your cliched group of middle-aged men here.

The group is made up of youthful undergraduates, members of the Wine Appreciation Club from Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and they know their merlot from their pinot noir.

Appreciating and drinking wine is fast becoming the next big thing among young people today.

The club started off with just 30 members three years ago, but it has more than 120 now.

Over at the Singapore Management University, the career services department said it had seen growing interest in its free yearly wine appreciation classes for undergraduates.

It runs these classes so that students can learn social skills that might help them in their future careers.



**Members paid \$50 each to enjoy a mix of Spanish food and dessert, as well as wines, at the NTU Wine Appreciation Club's annual wine dinner. -- BRYAN NEIL VAN DER BEEK**

And even though the National University of Singapore does not have an official wine appreciation club, arts and social sciences undergraduate and wine aficionado Vincent Kessler, 24, says these days he and his friends bring wine to parties, not hard liquor as they did before.

He said: 'For example, at a social gathering like a friend's birthday party, about 10 people will bring bottles of wine to share. It's all very informal.'

So why are young people getting into wine?

For Mr Tan Yean Kai, 25, the recent NTU computer engineering graduate who founded the wine appreciation club, it was his first taste of 'smooth and rich' Krug champagne in 2001, when he was working at gourmet shop Thos S.B. in the Raffles Hotel during his vacation.

'The first sip was marvellous and it was a life-changing kind of champagne,' he said.

Ms Teo Zi Fen, 22, the club's current president, became interested after a friend who worked at a wine shop introduced her to it.

Those in the wine business say that after the wine industry in Singapore picked up about 10 years ago, the average age of new customers has fallen from the mid-40s to mid- and late-20s and 30s.

Mr Leon Tan, corporate manager of wine importer The Ninth Vine, says that up to about five years ago, most people buying wine from his company were in their 'mid-20s to high-30s', and were 'label-drinkers', which means they would usually drink only wines that have been reviewed by wine academics and writers.

'But at our showroom now, we're also capturing the younger crowd, as young as 20 years old. Usually, the beginners prefer late harvest sweet wines, especially the women, although there is no one obvious favourite among young people,' he said.

Mrs Geraldine Camus, managing director of LinkOp, a Greek wine importer, also says the company has a growing

number of younger clients in their mid- to late-20s.

'At first, they come out of curiosity, just to taste or have a look. But once they've tasted and we've explained the specificities of each of our wines, many of them leave with a bottle.'

Wine journalist Ch'ng Poh Tiong, 49, who publishes The Wine Review and who has been giving wine talks for the past 25 years, says he has also noticed more young people getting interested in wine.

He says: 'Singapore is quite an affluent society, and wine is no longer seen as a luxury but as something that most people can afford.'

And that view is shared by Ms Teo, who says: 'Initially, I also thought it was a very 'high-class' thing. After some time, I realised you don't have to be rich and famous to talk about wine.'

'Wine is a very personal thing. Each person has a different taste for it. Wine doesn't have to be expensive to be something you enjoy.'

The club has equal numbers of men and women.

'You'd think that alcohol and guys are a sure thing, but we found that women are also very keen on wine,' said club founder Tan Yean Kai, 25, a recent computer engineering graduate.

'It's an important skill because next time at work, we might have to entertain and network over a dinner. You don't want to say the wrong things about your wine and risk offending your boss.'

At a tasting session, each participant pays less than \$20 to taste half-glass portions of five to six different wines.

'We tell them we're students and hope they'll give us a good price,' said Ms Teo.

'But the response has not been as encouraging as we'd hoped. Perhaps they think that as students we don't have the same spending power as working adults.'

The club organises wine appreciation courses and wine tasting workshops that are open to all NTU students, and more select wine dinners, for members and alumni.

At its annual wine dinner on Dec 29, some 30 members paid \$50 each and enjoyed a mix of Spanish food and dessert such as pork stew with stuffed olives and deep fried cream custard.

To go with the food, there were four different wines at the cocktail reception.

The club also held a wine fair in NTU last year, where more than 40 people turned up for the after-dark affair. They got to taste 15 different wines during the session.

**Tips for beginners**

MR DON Tay, 53, owner of wine importer Bacchus and wine bar Bacchus at the Fullerton Water Boathouse, has some suggestions for beginners:

- Don't waste money buying expensive wines because you won't be able to tell the difference easily yet. Start with something simple. When you're more familiar with the characteristics of wine and know more about wine and what you like, then a more expensive wine will be more worth buying.
- Buy what you like, and buy something that suits your taste. Don't buy something because it is expensive or because it has good reviews. And don't let the snobs tell you otherwise.
- Most beginners may prefer something a little lighter, with less alcohol content. The Moscato d'Asti from Italy is an easy-drinking semi-sparkling wine. Alternatively, Sauvignon Blancs from New Zealand are fresh and fruity, with a tropical fruit flavour that is well received.

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