

The very first decanting competition

by Tersina Shieh

Organised by The Vintage Port Academy (VPA), the Hong Kong 1st vintage port decanting competition no doubt it has stirred an excitement among Hong Kong sommeliers and service staff. Vintage port, bottled only after spending around two years in wood and without fining or filtering, develops significant sediments in the bottle especially after long ageing. Therefore, it is essential to decant an aged vintage port before consuming. VPA was formed by two competitors, Symington Family Estate and The Fladgate Partnership, who between them own six premium port houses to promote the appreciation and knowledge of vintage port in Asia. Nicolas Heath, marketing director of The Fladgate Partnership, said that the goals of this competition were to demystify decanting, and to encourage sommeliers not to view decanting as a chore, but rather as an opportunity to create a theatre at the table. Euan Mackay, sales director of Symington, further explained that the competition was judged on three elements: clarity as all customers would expect a clean glass of wine; wastage has to be kept to a minimum and efficiency since sommeliers would have other tables to serve. Each team had two members where one would watch the demonstration on how to decant a vintage port properly, and then conveyed the message to his members who would do the actual decanting. Therefore, the competition was also about team building and having fun.

The eight teams taking part in the competition were Conrad Hong Kong, Hotel ICON, Hyatt Regency Shatin, Metropark Hotel Wanchai, New World Millennium Hong Kong, Porterhouse by Laris, Renaissance Harbour View, and The Mira. The wine to be decanted was a Dow's 1985 vintage. Only the decanting time was counted, not opening the cork. The winning team was Conrad Hong Kong, represented by Andrew Lee, Restaurant Manager and Lucas Law, Assistant Manager. The team took 1.25 minutes, the second fastest, to decant the port which was among the clearest. Andrew and Lucas were thrilled to have won the prize. Both of them received a bottle each of Dow's and Taylor's 2003 Vintage Port in a tailor-made VPA wooden box. The prize

is unique for the reason that two brands of competing port were packaged together as one set. Andrew reckoned port is still a niche market. It is not an easy drink to sell because most customers don't understand it and education is the key to open the market, especially on the production method so customers can appreciate it, and also the differences between vintage and tawny ports. Lucas, on the other hand, was more positive. Conrad is opening a cheese library at its Pacific Bar and he saw it as an opportunity to promote port to more guests. The Mira was the first runner-up of the decanting competition with the least wastage and the clearest wine but were lost on time. One of the team members William Chan, manager of Cuisine Cuisine; the modern Cantonese restaurant thought since Chinese doesn't have a wine culture, we can be more creative and bold in terms of wine and food pairing. Roasted suckling pig, Peking duck and braised Wagyu beef have strong flavours and sweet fragrant from the meat and sauce which pair perfect with port. VPA has been running the 'Essential Knowledge of Port' workshop for six years in Hong Kong, and gradually expanded to other key cities including Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Macau. Students have to attend a half-a-day workshop followed by an examination. Those who pass will be awarded a certificate and a VPA pin, signalling he is a member of the Academy. Through its various activities, certainly increases visibility of port. Nicolas remarked that wine market is complex with a lot of choices. VPA workshops equipped students with more port knowledge thus improving their confidence to talk about port, selecting the appropriate style of port for different occasions, and suggesting port to their guests. All these help expand the port market. Given the rapid expansion of the wine market in Hong Kong after tax was demolished in 2008, had VPA not existed, there would be minimum visibility of the port category in the market today. The focus of VPA is Asia. However, VPA can only play an influential role in markets where there is a demand for knowledge, motivation from the industry, and a potential pool of consumers. Taiwan and Japan are on the top of VPA's list, and so are other key China cities such as Chengdu and Nanjiang.



1. Decanting Instructions to competitors from 8 teams. 2. Competition In Progress. 3. Competitor Otto Tam. 4. Competitor from New World Millennium. 5. Nicolas Heath from Fladgate gives a briefing. 6. Symington's Euan Mackay and Fladgate's Nicolas Heath judging. 7. Winning Team from Conrad Hotel Lucas Law and Andrew Lee. 8. Decanting Demonstration by Jorge Nunes from Symington. 9. Dow's 1985 To Be Decanted. 10. Competitor Hotel ICON's Ace Lee. 11. Conrad's Andrew Lee. 12. Competition Briefing. 13. Euan Mackay from Symington.