

French wineries show diversity at HK International Wine & Spirits Fair

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With more than 1,000 exhibitors and an expected 20,000 visitors, the sixth Hong Kong International Wine & Spirits Fair at the Convention and Exhibition Centre is Asia's largest trade fair dedicated to wine.

Wineries from Jordan, Lithuania, Montenegro and Morocco are represented for the first time this week but, unsurprisingly, France and Italy will have the largest delegations, with 150 exhibitors each.

For French wineries, China has become the number one target market, with the hope that it will show growth similar to that of the US in the 1980s and '90s.

"Asia is fundamental for us in terms of market growth because we can introduce our product and educate consumers," says Dominique Garréta, director of communications at Taittinger Champagne.

Angélique de Lencquesaing, co-founder and managing director of Idealwine, a website dedicated to buying, selling and valuing grand cru wines at online auctions, will be present for the fourth time. She estimates that Asian clients are the top buyers of older vintages of grand cru wines in the auction market.

The company opened an office in Hong Kong in 2012. "It was because of the demand of our local clients, since they often came to Paris to pick up their purchases," de Lencquesaing says. "The clients have evolved very quickly, and they search for very specific wines, especially wines from Burgundy. Our Hong Kong clients are a very educated group of people who have a remarkable desire to purchase these rare wines."

Asia is the only market where significant growth is possible for European winemakers. The French and European markets are, for the French and Italians, solidly established and capable of withstanding the effects of the economic and financial crises, while the US is a vital, but volatile, market. So the mainland and Hong Kong markets have become extremely attractive to European producers.

The Chinese market is virtually a requirement, though finding a way to get there, and dealing with the cultural differences, can be difficult.

Hong Kong is the most obvious port of entry. There is no import duty levied on wines and there is agreement with the Chinese government that enables less stringent importation requirements.

Hong Kong is also a free port, with very good storage facilities and excellent connectivity for air shipments. In short, the Hong Kong authorities' willingness to make the HKSAR a true "economic driver" has worked perfectly.

"The ease of conducting business, the economy, the excellent logistics, the knowledge of the auction market, and its luxury image, were very clear to us," de Lencquesaing says. "The mainland remains a very complex universe for us, though, even seeing it from Hong Kong."

The fair offers visitors a rare chance to see, understand and taste the great variety of wines made all over France which can be just as interesting as the classics.

Our Wine Experience, in the French pavilion, showcases wineries representing this wealth of diversity. There are the Grand Cru wines of Bordeaux such as Pape Clément, La Tour Carnet, Domaine de Chevalier, Guiraud, Beychevelle, Hostens Picant, without forgetting Smith Haut-Laffite and Angelus, which are both offering an exceptional master class with tastings.

There is Burgundy from Aegerter, Albert Bichot, Faiveley, Patrick Hudelot, Chateau du Moulin à Vent, and Dominique Laurent, Champagne from Charles Heidsieck and Veuve Fourny, and the Rhône and Languedoc from Chapoutier, La Gardine, and Chateau de Caraguilhes. It is a great display of French vitality.

Public admission is tomorrow (admission HK\$200) and visitors will be able to buy wine from exhibitors. Asia Wine Service and Education Centre will be running a seminar on looking for value in wine, while Debra Meiburg is offering a master class on matching wine with Cantonese cuisine (HK\$350).

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