

Food for Thought: A Wine Restaurant That's Young, Deep, Full of Character

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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That balance, however, is now being tipped in the other direction. The latest proof? The Singaporean restaurant Les Amis au Jardin, among the first in Asia to focus singularly on wine. Ignatius Chan and his partners, whose professions sound like the opening of a bad joke (a sommelier, a chef, a stockbroker and a gynecologist), have put several million Singapore dollars into this labor of love.

It's the offspring of Les Amis, a six-year-old wine bar and restaurant just off Orchard Road known for its widely praised wine selection. Inspectors from Wine Spectator magazine named its wine list the best in Asia. The selection at Les Amis and the new restaurant is, according to Mr. Chan, a work in progress. The partners started off with a fairly modest cellar, albeit one that cost about \$147,000. Now their stock is worth more than \$880,000. "We started out with very drinkable wines. There were very few new vintages. Then, as we got the cash flow, we put all the money back into the cellar," Mr. Chan says. "It is always difficult for new restaurants to lay down a cellar -- it takes a while to have a great list."

FULL TEXT

Corrections & Amplifications

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When it comes to mealtime, epicures going back to the ancient Greeks have argued that the food is vastly more

important than the wine. Even Brillat-Savarin, the great French gastronome, sniffed that wine, unlike food, "was not at all a conductor of ecstasy."

That balance, however, is now being tipped in the other direction. The latest proof? The Singaporean restaurant Les Amis au Jardin, among the first in Asia to focus singularly on wine. Ignatius Chan and his partners, whose professions sound like the opening of a bad joke (a sommelier, a chef, a stockbroker and a gynecologist), have put several million Singapore dollars into this labor of love.

Their emphasis on the cellar over the menu springs from the success of restaurants at wineries in places like Napa Valley in California. In some new eateries, the wine racks are the focus for both the mouth and eye. At Aureole, in the recently opened Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas, a vast Plexiglas structure holding 9,000 bottles towers 40 feet above diners. Wine stewards absail up and down the transparent structure to fetch bottles.

You won't see anything as undignified as high-flying sommeliers at Les Amis au Jardin. Located in a colonial house set in one of the most spectacular locations in Singapore -- the Botanic Gardens -- its balconies have been glassed in, giving the sense of eating in the midst of a tropical reverie by Douanier Rousseau.

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Mr. Chan is only 35 but is already an experienced wine buyer. As a young management trainee at Singapore's Mandarin Hotel, he was sent off to France for six months to learn the trade, studying at vineyards in Bordeaux and Champagne. He also spent time at the Crillon, the grandest of grand hotels in Paris. "I was able to see the passion involved in restaurant and wine service there. It is very different from this part of the world."

In 1991, he moved on to set up the cellar in the renovated Raffles Hotel, buying wines that would serve all of its restaurants and bars. But when buying for Les Amis au Jardin, he has taken a very different approach, thinking less of commercial considerations and indulging his own passions. "This isn't a corporate list. It reflects the likes of a handful of enthusiasts."

The list is particularly strong on red Burgundies. "They come from small growers so you get a sense of the winemaker's personality. Bordeaux are produced by bigger co-operatives so they are not as exciting for me, but they are very consistent and reliable. There can be lots of disappointments with Burgundies; there is no fruit or they are too thin. Bordeaux never fail you," he says.

Unusually for a restaurant in Asia, the list has depth as well as breadth, offering up to seven vintages of many wines. A dedicated taster with deep pockets could do a vertical tasting through the vintages or drink horizontally across the best vineyards of France for a particular year.

After focusing on classic French wines, Mr. Chan has widened the list to include New World wines and even two Lebanese offerings. In all, up to 800 wines are generally available, contrasting Les Amis with a number of over-ambitious restaurants that offer a book-length list from a Potemkin cellar.

Prices range from upwards of around S\$65 (US\$38) to more than S\$8,800 for a '47 Cheval Blanc, "the wine of the century," according to Mr. Chan. A '67 Chateau d'Yquem is S\$1,350, while a '61 Petrus, another prized wine, will set you back S\$8,000. So far nobody has sampled the Cheval Blanc.

Mr. Chan says he has seen a surge in wine appreciation in Asia, but high taxes and steep prices have left most people drinking at the lower end of the market. Few of the great wines are readily available in Asia. Les Amis buys mostly from dealers and at auction in Europe and the United States, as Asian importers lack the range and quality.

Despite an obvious wine bias, Les Amis au Jardin tends to the other half of the dining experience with lunch and dinner set menus in its small upstairs dining room. Chef Justin Quek's food is plush without being startlingly innovative. When I visited, the menu included guinea fowl and a confit of salmon with scallops and a sauce of wild rice and lobster. A risotto flavored with black truffles came topped with a succulent chunk of langostine and a perfectly cooked slice of foie gras, crisp on the outside, buttery within.

Mr. Chan has been trying to capture something of Europe in this little outpost but has been struggling to achieve the discipline and perfection of service of the best French establishments. "At the Crillon, they had five sommeliers. Hardly any restaurants here can afford even one." Just as he spoke of the difficulties of training staff, a loud crash emanates from the dining room followed by an ominous silence.

It may lack some of the slickness of great restaurants but Les Amis au Jardin also lacks the stiffness. Service is solicitous without being intrusive and with his bashful, slightly harried demeanor, Mr. Chan doesn't threaten guests with the hauteur that can make ordering wine an ordeal. Just ask for a recommendation and you will get no attitude, only advice from a real enthusiast.

Where It's At
Les Amis au Jardin (1 Scotts Road, No. 02-16 Shaw Centre, Tel. 733-2225) is tucked in the middle of the Singapore Botanic Gardens.
Drive to the visitors center on Cluny Road and walk up the path into the gardens until you come across the large black and white house.
Au Jardin, the restaurant, only has 11 tables, and guests often have to book two weeks in advance. But it's always worth calling on the off-chance of a cancellation. Lunch is less busy. Menus change weekly.
Lunch costs S\$55 and dinner S\$135. Wine starts at around S\$65 and

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-- R.T.

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