

Conference N°10



When world wines meet Chinese cuisines

Chinese cuisine is incredibly regionalised and complex, making wine pairing a tall order. **Hang Li** outlined the pitfalls of trying to marry wines and foods in China, and offered some advice on how to succeed.

Chinese cuisine is widely acknowledged worldwide for its quality and diversity. It differs significantly from Western gastronomy, not only in the choice of raw ingredients, but also in the cooking techniques used and resultant textures and flavours. "Chinese cooking methods are extremely varied and the different textures they create should be taken into account when trying to pair food and wines", said Hang Li. As the chairman of the China Sommelier Academy, he is constantly confronted with the issues which, as he points out, stem from lack of experience: "Our parents didn't teach us how to pair wine and food, it's a new topic". Not only have the Chinese yet to properly develop an interest in the subject, the myriad possibilities make it a thorny

issue. "In Chinese cuisine, sauces can totally change the way a food tastes", he pointed out. "Different, opposing flavours such as sweet and sour can also combine, unlike in Western food where there is usually a dominant flavour profile". Another vital difference that needs to be factored into the equation is the way dishes are presented, usually on a round, swivelling table designed for sharing, "whereas in the West, food is more of an individual experience. For the Chinese, the atmosphere is more important than the wine".

All-important balance

Despite all these major differences, some common pairing recommendations can be transposed to China, and a set of basic rules can easily be taken on board. "Balance and harmony between wine and food are key", said Li. Hence, as elsewhere in the world, a Napa vintage Cabernet-Sauvignon would sit well alongside a juicy, full-bodied pepper steak, whereas the obvious choice for vegetables would be a lighter Merlot. "Light foods and seafood require wines low in tannins, whereas barbecued foods and bitter foods should be paired with wines high in tannins". A counterpoint should be found to the dominant flavour profile in the food: "Sweetness balances with salt in dishes, salty flavours lighten the tannins and acidity should be slightly higher in the wine than in the food, it reduces saltiness". Perhaps more China-specific is the recommendation that "texture and weight are more important than aroma", mirroring the effect of cooking techniques on food textures. Li also warned against taking for granted the accepted protocol in other parts of the world, where red wine pairs with red meat and white wine with white meat – "this does not necessarily work because of different ways of cooking meat".



Education and greater maturity in the Chinese wine market are most certainly prerequisites if the Chinese are to embrace food and wine pairings more whole-heartedly. It isn't difficult to understand why local restaurants have yet to encourage them to do so as wine is still a low percentage of restaurant earnings, although Li stressed that "the maturity of the western restaurant market in China is very high". Aside from letting the Chinese heed their own personal preferences – and thereby avoid intimidating them with strict pairing rules – Li's final piece of advice was to create an experience, and in that respect, the Chinese probably aren't very different to other food and wine enthusiasts around the world.

