

Posted on October 21, 2012 by Lili Kocsis

## Interview with Zachary Yu, "The Wine Guy" of Langham Place Hotel Hong Kong

How does one pair wine to a cuisine whose central concept revolves around the sharing of multiple dishes that differ immensely from one another? Does one match each dish with the appropriate glass or search for a single miracle variety that goes with the myriad of flavors and textures on the table?

To find out, I sat down with "Wine Guy" **Zachary Yu** of **Ming Court**, the 2 Michelin Star Contemporary Cantonese restaurant at the [Langham Place Hotel](#), home to famed Master Chef Tsang Chiu King. The Ming Cellar, managed by Zachary, boasts an impressive 430+ labels from all over the world and a wine team that works tirelessly to recommend classic food and wine pairings as well as more adventurous ones.



— Zachary Yu, The Wine Guy of Langham Place Hotel Hong Kong

During our interview, Zachary explained to me why the rules of wine and food pairing at a French restaurant simply do not apply to Cantonese cuisine. He described to me his own pairing philosophy, one based more on texture than flavor profile. He walked me through the restaurant's unique iPad wine application and the multi-sorting system that allows customers to choose their wines by applying a variety of preference parameters. We discussed some of Chef Tsang Chiu King's signature dishes, including the Silky Egg White with Pepper Shrimp on Crispy Perilla Leaf and the classic Roast Goose, as well as the wines that Zachary would pair with them. Zachary also let me in on some of the wine-related events at Ming Court, including a Hairy Crab promotion at the end of October and weekly Argentine wine tastings through the month of November.

Our interview follows:

*Hi, I'm Zachary. I am The Wine Guy of Langham Place Hotel. "Wine Guy" is an interesting title and it comes from the fact that we do not have a Western restaurant here, so we didn't want to name our wine team member "Wine Steward" or "Sommelier" as in a Western restaurant. We want to simply call him "Wine Guy." This is friendlier, more approachable and encourages guests to ask for our assistance.*

**Please tell me about the restaurants at Langham Place and describe the cuisine that is offered at each of the restaurants.**

*We have 2 major restaurants at Langham Place Hotel. One is Tokoro, which is a Japanese restaurant with Robatayaki and a Whisky Bar; they serve whiskey, sake and some wine. Our signature is a 2 Michelin Star Restaurant, Ming Court, the kitchen of which is managed by Chef Tsang Chiu King, our Master Chef. I very much enjoy working with him, because he is always enthusiastic about trying out new ideas. Something we've really focused on in the past 2 years is wine pairing. We have invented some new dishes and put together new menus, and now you will find wine recommendations for all of our signature dishes on those menus.*



— Ming Court at Langham Place Hotel Hong Kong (Photo courtesy of Langham Place Hotel Hong Kong)

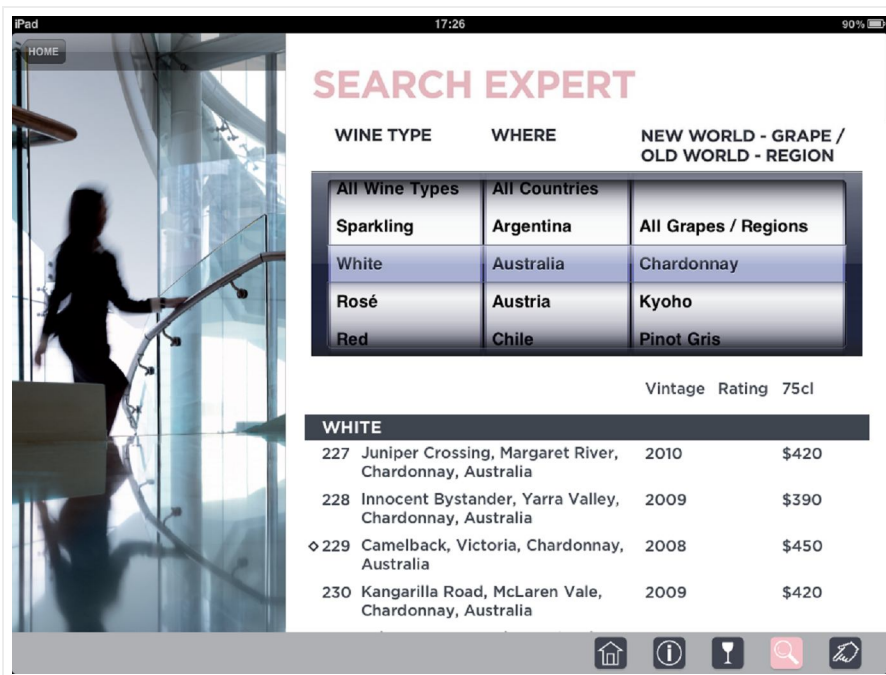
**Please tell me a bit about the composition of the wine list. Would you say it's made up of mostly New or Old World wines, and is there one particularly region that pairs especially well with the cuisine you offer here?**

*I would say I have quite a diverse selection. On Ming Court's wine list I cover most of the Old*

World regions and am currently adding some new wines from Georgia. Pairing with Cantonese food is interesting, because the cuisine can be quite diverse. Some dishes are inspired by the Northern Chinese cooking method and thus have a richer style. These work best with full-bodied wines. Some dishes are lighter, and with these I suggest light-bodied wines like Pinot Noir. Even within Cabernet Sauvignons, we don't want the wine to be a very powerful one with young tannins, but a mature, gentle and mellow one. So, I want to keep a diverse selection. The composition also depends on the season – different seasons, different offerings. Typically, I would say “elegant” is a key descriptor when selecting a nice bottle for your meal, because Cantonese food, even if it is inspired by the Northern Chinese cuisine, always maintains an elegance and a balance.

**And about the physical arrangement of your wine list, is it arranged by variety or by region?**

We have it all on an iPad application, which is a very unique way of listing wines, compared to the traditional print version. On the application, we have a multi-sorting system – Old World wines are sorted by region, while New World wines are sorted by grape variety. We think this is a much easier way for the customer to choose the wine. At the same time we also have some unique ways to get to the wines, such as the “Gentleman’s Drink” selection, which lists wines perfectly fitted to men’s preferences and we also have the equivalent for ladies’ preferences. We include wine and food pairing recommendations in the app, with different grape varieties suggested for each dish and vice-versa. Because it would be quite difficult for our team and for customers to remember the pronunciation and grape varietal composition of all 450 labels, I also add a bin number to each wine, to simplify it. We get some customers that want to order a wine, but they hesitate to pronounce the name. These customers are happy to order the wine by the bin number instead, because it is easier.



— Ming Court’s Wine List Application (Photo courtesy of Langham Place Hotel Hong Kong)

**I’ve also heard some great things about Ming Court’s Ming Cellar. How many labels does it hold and how do you use the space?**

Before we built Ming Cellar, we only had a selection of around 100 labels. Once we added the cellar we had 300 and after we started using this application, we built the program up to 450 labels. How do we work this room? The interesting thing we want to suggest to our customers is to pick their wine before entering the restaurant. Everyone knows that Cantonese food is quite difficult to properly pair with wine. However, if you select the wine first and let the wine inspire you and tell you what to eat, you can ask our wine team members to recommend a compatible dish, and you may end up with a miracle pairing on your table. That’s why we have a long table and chairs here, as well as wine bottles always open. We invite people in to have a tasting

*before their meal, and through it we discover what their preference is and what they like. Then we recommend the food to go with the wine they choose.*



— Ming Cellar (Photo courtesy of Langham Place Hotel Hong Kong)

### ***What is your philosophy on pairing Cantonese food with wine?***

*For me the key point is texture, especially when I'm pairing wine with Cantonese food, because in Cantonese cuisine texture is as important, if not more important, than flavor. Bean curd, for example, is typically silky. We have a signature dish here, which contains a stir-fried, silky egg white [Photo below courtesy of Langham Place Hotel Hong Kong]. Honestly, I really can't tell you that egg white has a lot of flavor. The key thing is the technique the chef uses to bring out such a silky texture in the egg white. When pairing with wine, you have to focus on not overpowering the flavor of the dish, but also maintain its texture. So for this dish I will always suggest pairing a wine with a round acid rather than a sharp acid. A Sauvignon Blanc, for example, would be far too acidic for the egg white. A Pinot Gris, such as the [2007 Movia Pinot Grigio](#) from Brda, Slovenia, on the other hand, with a softer texture on its acid, and its characteristic punch of spiciness, would work very well with the egg white as well as with the shrimp served with it.*



**And how do you deal with the fact that in Cantonese cuisine involves the sharing of multiple dishes between many people? Do you match each dish to a wine or does a table usually order a single wine to match all of the dishes they order?**

*This is something I learned a lesson about at Ming Court. Before I worked here, I thought I could suggest each dish with a wine and that it would work, like when you're having dinner in a French restaurant. But this is just simply not the case with Cantonese food. At Ming Court the food is fantastic, as is the wine. Pairing is also good, but the whole experience just fails to work. When you have four different glasses of wine in front of you and four different dishes that you are sharing in the center of the table, you will inevitably end up complicated and confused. Also, you need to use chopsticks and so every time you need to pick up a piece of meat, you would need to reach over all the wine glasses, which just doesn't work. We figured out two solutions to the problem. The first one is to pick the best pairing with a dish that is the guest of honor's preference, the dish which is the reason why they are coming to Ming Court. Maybe they just come for one or two dishes and are die-hard fans of those, so we just pair one wine with those dishes. The second solution is more interesting. We tell them to come to this cellar and, using our wine application, to "spin the wheel" on the touchscreen. The wheel picks out a grape variety at random and the staff then helps pair dishes that you can share to that wine. This activity is a great talking point and it often arouses great conversation to have a new pairing on the table. It is really fun and unique way to choose your wine, and I think our restaurant is the first to do it this way.*

**And about the structure of the clientele here at Ming Court, how would you say it is divided between locals, expats and tourists?**

*Most of the guests are local, young execs who dine out quite often and are happy to find good wine and Chinese food at our restaurant. We have a very, very long list for reservations, so we always keep some of our tables open for Langham Place Hotel room guests, because most of the guests who visit the hotel are also interested in having a nice dinner at Ming Court, and we want them to have a chance to try it as well.*

**Is there any trend that you have noticed among your guests about regions and varietals that are most popular to order? Or do they like to try different things?**

*They really like to try different things, and because of this we will soon be trying a different method of pairing suggestions on our next menu. We will include the classic pairing, as well as an "adventure pairing" with each dish. So, following our recommendations, guests will be able to have either the traditional type of wine to match to their dish, or something a bit more unexpected. We have already done a brief trial of this, and have had very positive feedback. The end of October, for example, Hairy Crab season will start and we will promote this item on our menu. Traditionally, we pair Hairy Crab with Huangjiu, Chinese yellow wine because that is the classic pairing. This time, however, we will also have an "adventure pairing" and this will be Sherry, which has a touch of sweetness and a rich body. It is very similar to yellow wine but differs in the shape of its acidity and in its balance. It works very well with the crab. One I would especially recommend with the Hairy Crab is the [Lustau East India Solera Sherry](#).*



— Lustau East India Solera Sherry

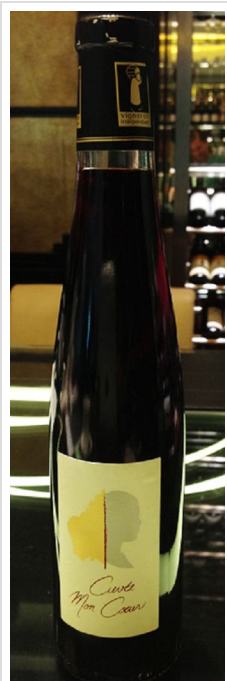
**Are there one or two signature dishes that you feel best represent Ming Court? What wine would you pair with them?**

*One signature pairing I would highly recommend is the Silky Egg White, Pepper Shrimp on Crispy Perilla Leaf with a Pinot Gris, which I mentioned before. If you want to try something a bit simpler, I would suggest our Roast Goose [Photo below courtesy of Langham Place Hotel Hong Kong]. This is a very popular dish, which you can find in most Cantonese restaurants but ours is especially popular. It works well with many different styles of wine – from full-bodied white wines to light-bodied red wines, or even sweet wines. Sweet wine is a very interesting pairing with Roast Goose. It is very characteristic of Cantonese cuisine to have different types of sauces alongside your dish and traditionally Roast Goose is served with a plum sauce that is sweet with a strong fruit character. I would suggest replacing the plum sauce with a sweet wine like Sauternes, such as the [2002 Château de Myrat](#), which has an intense apricot flavor and a fruity sweetness to it. The beautiful thing about Sauternes is that it also has a nice balance in acidity, which helps a lot in bringing out the flavors of the goose. I always encourage guest to consider the accompaniment that comes with the dish when pairing a wine to it. The accompaniment will often tell you which wine to choose, and at times it will even inspire you to choose a wine with a style that can replace the sauce. It's an easy way to pair a wine to a dish and guarantees success.*



***I've also heard that for the past Mid-Autumn Festival Ming Court was offering its signature Michelin Mooncakes. What kind of wines would you pair to these traditional pastries?***

*We have a new signature mooncake, which is made with mixed nuts, black truffle and Parma ham [Photo below courtesy of Langham Place Hotel Hong Kong]. It is a traditional mooncake, but with a fusion touch. After trying out many different things, we found that the best pairing is sweet red wine, which can either be Port, sweet Sherry or a Late Harvest sweet red wine from Austria. I recently got one called **Cuvée Mon Coeur** from Rhône – they use a Gamay and a production method that makes a Straw Wine. Sweetness with just a touch of tannin works best with the mixed nuts.*



***And are there any upcoming wine-related events here at Ming Court that you would like to mention?***

*In November we will still have the Hairy Crab promotion. We will also have an Argentine wine promotion. Every Wednesday we will have tastings of different types of Argentine wines. The first Wednesday we will have Torrontés and Chardonnay, the Argentine whites. Next will be the blends and some interesting varieties like Bonarda. And the last tasting will be the best, featuring Argentina's signature, the Malbec.*

***That sounds fantastic. Thanks so much for your time.***

*Thank you.*

**Ming Court, Langham Place Hotel**

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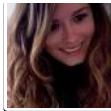
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Lili's most common wine-related faux pas is swirling the glass aggressively while speaking to people, until the wine spills over the edge.

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