

PHOTOGRAPH © ANTHONY BUTLER/DECANTER



CH'NG POH TIONG

When I'm 64

WHEN I AM 64, I want to look like Jean Hugel, who turned 80 last 28 September but celebrated it on 1 November with British wine writers and other friends at Le Gavroche, surely one of London's finest French restaurants.

'Winemakers don't exist. Wine is produced from grapes and grapes are grown!' the birthday boy insisted.

When I am 64, I even want to sound like Johnnie, as he is affectionately known. In fact, I want to be able, now, to espouse the things he holds dear to his heart: 'Never go to the stock exchange with your wine. My grandfather always said that when you pass a banker on the street and the banker says "hello", if you can reply, "I have no time", then you are really doing well.'

**HANS ULRICH
WOULD BE
PROUD OF
JOHNNIE
HUGEL, THE
GREATEST
AMBASSADOR
ALSACE HAS
EVER KNOWN**

The success story is of course Alsatian. In fact, Johnnie once told me that you could not use the expression to describe the wine but only the people and the famous Alsatian dog that, across the border, is referred to as the 'German Shepherd'. (The Germans have sheep?).

The Hugel wines don the famous yellow label, the complexion that, in the Chinese and Malay civilisations, is reserved for royalty. Although the Hugels' origins are Swiss when their ancestors first emigrated to France in the

17th century, they are now entirely and vinously French.

In 1639, Hans Ulrich Hugel was made a freeman of Riquewihr and, till this day, all the labels bear the initials 'HVH'. It is also from that year – 'Depuis 1639' – that the brand marks its origin.

Hans Ulrich would be justly proud of his descendant Johnnie Hugel, the greatest ambassador Alsace has ever known. Johnnie is not only inimitable but also indomitable. And one of the funniest winemakers, oops, 'wine growers', I know.

About 10 years ago, before Johnnie retired and was still visiting Asia, one time I fetched him from his hotel an hour before a tasting at the Singapore Cricket Club (used more for drinking/eating than for sports) to show him the sights of Singapore.

When we arrived at a local Chinese landmark, I proudly informed Johnnie that, 'this is a very old temple.'

'How old?' he pursued.

'More than 100 years,' I said.

'You call that old, my family has been growing wine since 1639.'

Not one to care to lose an argument, I returned: 'And the only reason your family has been producing wine since 1639 is because you are still trying to get it right.' We had a good laugh in front of a host of stern-looking Chinese deities.

These days, whenever the opportunity presents itself, I tell my audience of wine lovers that the Hugels have been producing wine since 1639... hours. They all break into laughter too. Before sinking their noses into the waiting glass of Riesling, Pinot Gris or Gewurztraminer. Particularly when their youthful green colour has turned to evolved yellow. Even gold.

So too the crowd at Le Gavroche last 1 November.

The 1990 Riesling Vendange Tardive or 'Late Harvest' has honey/apple fruit edged with indescribable minerality. 'It's so incredibly fresh!' I blurted out, to which my right-hand neighbour Michael Broadbent proclaimed: 'It can only be Riesling!'

Johnnie, generous soul that he is, also pulled out from his own cellar, bottles of the 1982 Léoville-Barton. If you've driven up the D2 in the Médoc, you'll know that this is St-Julien fast approaching Pauillac. Cigar, tobacco, leather and wonderful freshness provided an excellent pairing for the delicious *Perdreau Rôti* and *Risotto aux Truffes* or Roast Partridge and Risotto with Black Truffles.

Johnnie prefers his foie gras after the main course, and what Johnnie wanted, Johnnie got. Well, at least on his birthday bash. I just want foie gras any time.

Hugel Tokay Pinot Gris Vendange Tardive 1986, from magnum no less, should be a natural choice for everyone's 'Desert Island' selection. Provided there is also a castaway refrigerator. Alright, at least a big wine bucket. With unmeltable ice cubes of course.

I must have appeared very thirsty to the other guests because I kept taking whiffs, and sips, of this incredible revelation. Not because it is mildly reductive (which a gentle decanting will easily sort out) but for the playful lychee perfume the 18-year-old was wearing. This after all, is Pinot Gris, not Gewurztraminer.

I was rather proud of, and rewarded, myself with another big mouthful when my august neighbour affirmed, 'but of course you're right'. Now, that's what I call instant 'Broadbent' access.

The service staff was also waiting. Once again, they lowered the magnum over my shoulder and into the empty glass. I took an even greedier swipe this time.

God Bless you Johnnie. You deserve your good fortune and ripe old age. Except you don't look anywhere near 64.

Ch'ng Poh Tiong is the publisher of *The Singapore Wine Review*.