



It's liquid heaven

EARLIER in the year, wine importer Muihua Sdn Bhd, together with Rick's Café, presented a delectable evening featuring Hugel wines. A scrumptious menu prepared by Chef Tim Yee was paired with fine Alsace wine, proving yet again the versatility of this white.

What made the wine dinner all the more special was the presence of Etienne Hugel, a 12th generation member of the famed Hugel family from the Alsace region of France.

The Hugel estate was established in 1639 by Hans Ulrich Hugelin. Despite its modest size, the Hugel company enjoys a worldwide reputation of producing premium quality whites. The Hugel family's vineyard estates cover more than 25 hectares, exclusively in Riquewihr, and almost half of which are in the Grand Cru zone.

Fertiliser-free, low yields, vines averaging 30 years, thinning out of excess bunches, and picking by hand — these are all factors which contribute to the high quality which comes through in the wines.

The Hugel family is in an enviable reputation currently, respected for their wine growing skills and for the meticulous way their vineyards are cultivated.

To start things off on the right footing, tulips of chilled Gentil Hugel 2006 were served as a welcome drink to wet our pipes. A refreshing start to the evening, with a light, flowery bouquet.

Hugel, with all his French charm, played the perfect host that evening, moving easily amongst the tables of wine cognoscenti, giving his obligatory speeches, fighting valiantly against the boisterous yam seng party that was going on in another part of Rick's Café.

At the end of the day, it was the wine which grabbed the spotlight and it was the palate that was pleased.

The first course of goat's cheese, beetroot and walnut terrine, apple puree and green peppercorn vinaigrette was paired with Hugel Pinot Gris Tradition 04.

What a wonderfully creamy goat's cheese it was! It glided like silk on the tongue, and had a most pleasing aftertaste.

It will be hard to choose a better partner for the cheese than the Tradition 2004, which was crisp, young and lively. It cuts across the silk like a pair of sharp scissors. Altogether a balanced pairing.

It was a signature Hugel Gewurztraminer which was selected to go with the tagine spiced consommé with poached chicken mousseline. The clear soup was a delicate background against which the creamy luxury of the mousseline was displayed. Taste-wise, the subtlety of the chicken was enhanced by the sweet, sexy Gewurztraminer.

I must admit I am partial to this wine. A whiff is enough to transport you to the salubrious vineyards of Alsace in the summer. The perfumed bouquet of tropical fruit is just so very seductive. The tasting notes suggest mango, kumquat, and rose petals with a touch of oriental spice.

This fine, classic Gewurztraminer is dry yet soft and goes wonderfully well with Chinese food, which should make it a hit at Chinese dinners the year round.

After that high, we were faced with a solitary lobster and scallop ravioli with braised fennel, basil tomato and sage burnt butter. The texture of this dish is superb, rich and buttery and the burnt butter added richness to the tongue in contrast to the sharpness of the chilled Riesling. Both Hugel Riesling 05 and Riesling Jubilee 04 were served, each with very different characteristics.

To crown the wine dinner, a Gewurztraminer Vendange Tardive 02 (so rare, it's not available yet in Malaysia) was paired with pan-fried foie gras on caramelised duck breast, sweet turnip, leek and potato gnocchi. It's a sweet wine but very refreshing with lovely, lychee flavours and hint of rose petals wafting through the lip of the glass enticing you to sip yet another mouthful.

The 2002 vintage in particular enjoyed a cold January, flowering in June with an early, large harvest which began on the last day of September. Ripeness levels were excellent. On the last days of October, a strong dry southerly wind allowed the Hugel family to harvest its best Gewurztraminer at Vendange Tardive levels (over 16 per cent potential).

This wine is great on its own on account of its full fruit flavours and golden, silky texture. It's liquid heaven as far as I am concerned.

Dessert followed to round the evening off, a sophisticated star anise and vanilla bean flan, passionfruit poached pear. A fitting end to a rather enjoyable evening with the sparkling company of Hugel and the Muihua folks.