



grilled stingray with sambal sauce

Happy as a Clam



stir-fried chut-chut in sambal sauce

THE INSEPARABLE RELATIONSHIP SHARED BETWEEN A GLASS OF WHITE WINE AND A PLATE OF THE FRESHEST SHELLFISH IS ONE THAT WARMS THE COCKLES OF ANY GASTRONOME'S HEART. TO TEST THE BOUNDARIES, I INVITE TWO FRIENDS TO A LOCAL HAWKER CENTRE, WHERE WE SIT DOWN TO PAIR LOCAL SHELLFISH WITH AUSTRIAN WINES.



Michael Thurner

Koh Chuan Huat

Lindsay Alex Foy

The owner of ABC Seafood Barbecue, Koh Chuan Huat, has been in this line for over 20 years.



hum (cockles)



chut-chut (whelks)



gong-gong (conches)



dua tao (mussels)

You could be forgiven for finding the world of Austrian wines hard to understand. From the labels on the bottles to the complex systems of wine classifications, it seems some sort of esoteric studies are in order before anything becomes comprehensible. There is a reason for this, and I venture it could be the rich history behind Austrian viticulture. Evidence of grape-growing in Traisental and bronze wine flagons belonging to the La Tène culture, both dating back as far as 4,000 years, suggests that the locals have been swirling their wines in their Riedel glasses long before the Romans were pressing grapes under their feet. Just kidding. Wine glasses by the Austrian-based glass company as we know them did not come about until Claus J Riedel (1925–2004), the ninth generation in the Riedel family, took over.

Austrian viticulture witnessed ups and downs through the centuries, caused mostly by various invaders of the political and biological kinds that included Bavarians, Slavs, and phylloxera root aphids. After World War I, Austria ranked third in the world's largest wine producer, but much of its wines were light and acidic, sold mostly to Germany for blending with other wines. Indiscriminate wine brokers soon discovered that sweetness and body could be imparted to the wines through the addition of small amounts of diethylene glycol, a clear, odourless chemical that belongs – and should stay as such – in the production

of solvents and antifreeze. This 'antifreeze scandal' was uncovered in 1985 when a certain thick wine broker tried to claim for the cost of the chemical on his tax return, dealing a singular disastrous blow to the Austrian wine industry and crippling exports. But it turns out that this was a *felix culpa* – a happy fault; the Austrian Wine Marketing Board (AWMB) was established as an immediate response to this 'necessary sin'. According to its website at www.winesfromaustria.com, the mission of the AWMB "is the implementation of marketing measures for Austrian wine," functioning to support and coordinate "the efforts of the Austrian wine industry to maintain quality and sales". Following this was the imposition of new regulations that restricted yield and resulted in the loss of the middlemen's jobs. Consequently, producers were forced to sell direct, and a young generation of winemakers more receptive to the outside world that possessed better knowledge of winemaking ensured the country's shift of emphasis from quantity to quality. Today, Austria ranks as one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing wine region. According to a March 2008 report published by the AWMB, 2007 was an excellent year for exports: "At the end of December, it was estimated that total exports for 2007 would be at 51 million litres with a value of €93 million. Now, the actual figures are much higher: according to Statistik Austria, total exports for 2007 were 56 million litres with a sensational total value of more than €105 million."

Austria's wine-producing regions, which are found east of the country, are divided into four main zones: Niederösterreich (Lower Austria), Burgenland, Steiermark (Styria) and Wien (Vienna). Austrian wines are known primarily for their dry, spicy whites, full-bodied reds and luscious dessert wines, with the whites making up 70 percent of the total production. The Grüner Veltliner, Austria's indigenous white grape, stands out from among the 22 white varieties used for making high quality wines; according to the figures I obtained from the 2008 edition of the *Documentation Austrian Wine*, the Grüner Veltliner is responsible for about 33 percent of all whites. A wine made from this grape variety typically displays a wide range of flavours and is favoured for its friendliness towards food and particularly asparagus. Austrian winemakers also make it their weapon of choice in their concerted move towards dry, better quality wines. The Riesling, so favoured by their German neighbours, plays a much smaller role here, occupying only four percent of the vineyards, surpassed by the Müller-Thurgau, Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay.

Austrian wines are growing in prominence on the global wine scene, even clinching awards at international wine competitions. Can you imagine my thrill when I heard that Michael Thurner, who worked at the AWMB for eight years and was its managing director from 2002 – 2006, is bringing in many of these exciting Austrian wines? As soon as I heard the news, I hurried over to the nearest telephone and called him to arrange for a tasting and food pairing with some of his Austrian whites. At about the same time, I found out that Indoguna Singapore Pte Ltd also carries a few Austrian whites under the Schloss Gobelsburg brand, so I telephoned Indoguna and asked for a bottle to be sent for tasting and pairing; meanwhile I extended an invitation to the company's fine food division manager Lindsay Alex Foy to come along and join in the meal. I wanted to see how these wines would pair with the local dishes I had in mind, and I figured Foy would have some interesting things to say. You'll see.



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dua tao in sambal sauce

- 800g mussels (or clams), scrubbed clean
- Cooking oil, for stir-frying
- 40g garlic cloves, peeled and diced
- 250ml water
- 2 tsp (each) fish sauce, sambal paste* and cornstarch
- 1 whole egg, lightly beaten
- Salt and sugar, to taste
- Parsley sprigs, sliced onions and sliced red chillies, for garnishing

* Sambal Paste

- 6 red chillies, sliced and seeded
- 6 dried red chillies, soaked
- 2 shallots, peeled and chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped
- 2 tsp dried shrimp paste
- Salt and sugar, to taste

- For the sambal paste: Place all the ingredients into a food processor and pulse until smooth. Set aside.
- Bring a pot of water to a boil and blanch the mussels in the boiling water until they are partially cooked, for about a minute. Drain and set side. Heat the cooking oil in a frying pan and stir-fry the diced garlic until fragrant. Transfer the blanched mussels into the frying pan, add in 250ml water, fish sauce, sambal paste and cornstarch and stir-fry until well mixed. Add in the beaten egg while stirring continuously, and continue cooking until the sauce has reached a desired consistency. Season to taste with salt and sugar.
- Place the cooked mussels onto a serving plate and garnish with parsley sprigs, sliced onions and red chillies. Serves 4

blanched gong-gong

- 800g conches (or cockles), scrubbed clean
- Parsley sprigs, sliced onions and sliced red chillies, for garnishing
- Chilli sauce, for serving

- Bring a pot of water to a boil and blanch the conches in the boiling water until thoroughly cooked, for about 4 minutes. Drain and transfer the blanched conches onto a serving plate, garnish with the parsley sprigs, sliced onions and red chillies, and serve with the chilli sauce. Serves 4



stir-fried chut-chut in sambal sauce (page 135)

- 800g whelks (or balitong), scrubbed clean
- 200ml water
- 2 tsp (each) fish sauce and sambal paste*
- 1 tsp cornstarch
- Salt and sugar, to taste
- Parsley sprigs, for garnishing
- Sliced onions and sliced red chillies, for garnishing

- Bring a pot of water to a boil and blanch the whelks in boiling water until they are partially cooked, for about a minute. Drain and transfer the blanched whelks to a frying pan, add in 200ml water, fish sauce, sambal paste and cornstarch and stir-fry until the sauce has reached a desired consistency. Season to taste with salt and sugar.
- Place the cooked whelks onto a serving plate and garnish with parsley sprigs, sliced onions and red chillies. Serves 4



stir-fried dua tao in sambal sauce



stir-fried lala in sambal sauce



blanched gong-gong



blanched hum



Austrian wine expert Michael Thurner (left) and fine food connoisseur Lindsay Alex Foy make a very interesting match at the dinner table.

The Pairing

One of the best relationships that have ever been forged on earth is between dry white wines and shellfish. But I wanted to push the boundaries a little and experiment to see how this rule applies to local shellfish dishes, so I invited Thurner and Foy for a sumptuous meal of Austrian wines with foods a sound mind might otherwise have prevented them from trying. My location of choice was the ABC seafood barbecue hawker stall (located at the ABC Brickworks Food Centre) for a good reason: The owner, Koh Chuan Huat, has been in this line for over 50 years; in his 60s now, Koh boasts 20 years of experience in preparing a host of local seafood dishes.

By the time we arrived at his stall on a late Tuesday afternoon, trays of critters were already laid out on the storefront. There were clams slightly larger than the size of your thumbnail, whose shells bear unique designs and streaks the colour of sand; roundish cockles with their pink lips and little tongues lazily peering out of their white and brown shells (the 'tongues' are actually feet used for burrowing into sand); oblong mussels taking turns to open and close their moss green shells; tiny whelks (sea snails) with long beautiful spiral-shaped shells trudging nowhere, and bright big pearl conches tainted brown, cream and gold, too stately to move. These animals are generally given the collective culinary term 'shellfish,' more specifically molluscs, a group that includes bivalves (clams, cockles, mussels), and gastropods (conches and whelks) and, for some reason I fail to comprehend, cephalopods, which means that the squid and octopus are part also of the shellfish family. Maybe biologists should start spending more time in the kitchen than the laboratory. (I have my reasons for not becoming a scientist; the discovery of a new dish does more for man's happiness than the discovery of a new star, said my idol Brillat-Savarin.)

The locals have very peculiar names for the shellfish we were going to eat. Clams are known as lala, and cockles are called hum. Mussels are referred to as dua tao, which is Hokkien meaning 'big head', and the tiny whelks are called chut-chut, the sound you make when you wrap your lips around the shell and with quick, successive breaths of air, suck the meat out of the shells. I don't have the faintest idea why the pearl conches are called gong-gong.

As soon as the wines were poured, a plate of gong-gongs instantly appeared. Minimal preparation was involved in the cooking of this dish; the conches are simply blanched in water and then served straight up, with a saucer of very spicy chilli sauce on the side. With the aid of a bamboo skewer provided, all you have to do is to try to fish out the conch's meat, dip it in the chilli sauce, and eat it. On its own, it is bland and can be a little off-putting. Conches are pretty funky critters when it comes to texture. Some parts of it are chewy and rubbery, and some soft and even somewhat gelatinous; the intestines are usually considered unpalatable and discarded. After popping a gong-gong into his mouth, Foy stuck up his thumb up, gave a big grin and said, "Best!" He offered, "The wine has a refreshing effect and somewhat tames the spiciness of the chilli. Crisp acidity in the wine can be a good match for spicy seafood, but if the chilli is too spicy, it can kill the wine." Thurner reasoned, "Without the chilli, the Sauvignon Blanc and the Riesling make better pairings; the mineral quality of these two wines match the mineral flavour of the dish. With the chilli, you need something fuller-bodied and richer. The Grüner Veltliner 'Berg' and the Grüner Veltliner 'Lamm' are more opulent, so let's try." After some thought, Thurner shared, "To be honest, the chilli is too spicy for all four wines. It's a very tough match; with this chilli, maybe a Spatlese or Auslese from Germany will do better. This is just too intense and spicy." Both Thurner and Foy agreed that the Sauvignon Blanc would be the best match for the gong-gongs because of its aroma and minerality.

The dua tao were a little more interesting to eat; the mussels are first blanched in boiling water and then stir-fried in a mixture of onions, sambal (a fiery hot condiment made primarily with chilli) and chilli; the resulting sauce, spicy with attractive sweet undertones, is thickened with egg and cornstarch. When you have eaten fresh mussels prepared like this, and then ever have the misfortune to eat mussels that were frozen for storage and thawed before cooking, the contrast can be very painful. With this lightly spicy dish, Foy's preferred wine to pair was the Grüner Veltliner 'Lamm'. He explained, "The dish is quite light in flavour and taste, and the egg softens the spiciness in the chilli. It works well with the Grüner Veltliner." Thurner opined, "This dish has more texture than the previous one, and I would be pretty happy if I



Tasting Notes

2007 Schloss Gobelsburg Grüner Veltliner 'Lamm'

Headed by the very talented winemaker Michael Moosbrugger, named winemaker of the year 2006 by Austrian magazine *Falstaff*, the Schloss Gobelsburg winery in Langenlois is the oldest in the Danube region, with a documented history dating back to 1171. The 2007 vintage, brought in to Singapore by fine food and wine purveyor Indoguna Singapore Pte Ltd, is an impressive wine with white pepper, tobacco and vanilla pods on the nose, followed by white fruit flavours and slight sweetness on the palate, and ends with a long, brilliant finish.

2007 Tement Sauvignon Blanc 'Steirische Klassik'

Owned and operated by the Tement family, the Tement winery sits in southern Styria where it enjoys excellent conditions for growing white grapes (95 percent of its production is dedicated to white varieties). A majority of its wines fall under the 'Steirische Klassik' appellation, such as this Sauvignon Blanc that Artisan Cellars Pte Ltd brings in. In the 2007 vintage, one can detect a highly aromatic bouquet of fresh cut grass with hints of white flowers. It is zesty and vibrant on the palate with good, clean acidity and a juicy finish.

2007 Huber Grüner Veltliner 'Berg'

Here is one exciting winery for you to keep your eyes peeled. *Falstaff* Grüner Veltliner Grand Prix winner and best white wine producer at the International Wine & Spirit Competition in London 2006, 29-year-old winemaker Markus Huber is a promising young talent on the Austrian wine scene. His Grüner Veltliner of the 2007 vintage reminds one of ripe fruits and tobacco on the nose with a hint of honey. There are streaks of white pepper and minerality and good concentration on the palate, with a powerful finish.

2007 Huber Riesling 'Berg'

Other than the Grüner Veltliner 'Berg', Artisan Cellars also brings in the 2007 Riesling 'Berg'. Riesling makes up only ten percent of the grape varieties at Huber's estate; Grüner Veltliner occupies 70 percent, and the rest are Müller Thurgau, Sauvignon Blanc and Zweigelt. The 2007 vintage has pure peach aromas; on the palate it is tightly knit and has a good acid structure rich in finesse, making it a very suitable wine for many Asian dishes.



Crisp acidity in the wine can be a good match for spicy seafood, but if the chilli is too spicy, it can kill the wine.



The Classification Of Austrian Wines

Austria's classification system is similar to the German one, beginning with *tafelwein* (table wine), and moving up to *landwein* (country wine) and *qualitätswein* (quality wine). Of particular note is the *Districtus Austriae Controllatus* (Latin for 'Controlled District of Austria') appellation. Launched in 2002, the DAC is Austria's answer to the French appellation *d'origine contrôlée* or the Italian *denominazione di origine controllata*, of which five currently exist, namely: Weinviertel, Mittelburgenland, Traisental, Kremstal and Kamptal.

On The Side...

Because they deteriorate quickly after death, shellfish should be kept alive until it is time to cook them. We should behave towards shellfish the same way we do towards crustaceans, either cooking them alive or killing them just minutes prior to cooking. The common way to cook these shellfish is to blanch them in boiling water; some are then stir-fried in a sauce (such as sambal chilli) to give flavour. But I have found that blanching them in plain boiling water renders them completely flavourless. The way we can resolve this, I think, is to take the same approach as cooking pasta or crustaceans i.e. to blanch the shellfish in salted water so that they are tasty even when eaten on their own.

were served any of these four wines. The Sauvignon Blanc is slightly too aromatic for this dish, so it doesn't get a score of a hundred. The Riesling is dry but has a certain 'sweet' flavour that doesn't match so well. The two Grüner Veltliners are great."

The lala dish was prepared in pretty much the same way as the mussels that preceded it, though I was fonder of this dish than the mussels. Foy commented, "These clams have a certain type of sea salt flavour due to the natural salt content of the sea. It's good to wash everything down with the Riesling; it's sharp and not too acidic, and cleanses the palate nicely." Thurner agreed partially, adding, "The Grüner Veltliner 'Lamm' works really well with this dish. It takes all the flavours in the mouth, brings them around, and washes them all down. It is a powerful dish and this time, I don't like the Sauvignon Blanc and the Grüner Veltliner 'Berg' because they are too light for this dish."



[These wines] are on the very aromatic side and have good minerality, which can go with many of these dishes.

We then moved on to the tiny chut-chuts, which were blanched and then stir-fried in a sambal sauce, without the starch to thicken the sauce. All attempts to dig the meat out with the bamboo skewer will only result in futility and great frustration. As mentioned above, the only efficient way to eat this is to suck the meat out of their shells. When I asked Foy for his opinion on this dish, he replied, "Fun! Well there is some bitterness and chilli coming through, so you need something acidic. I would choose the Grüner Veltliner 'Berg.'" Thurner agreed, adding, "The dish is neutral in flavour but rich in texture. It does have a certain spiciness but not so much. All four wines are actually ok with this dish, because that's the style of the whole flight. You need elegant, mineral styles of wines that come from a cool climate, and the natural acidity and freshness in the four wines work so well with these kind of food." Foy and Thurner were initially hesitant about

moving on to the hum. The cockles were blanched in hot water very quickly, so they have not cooked through and were still rather bloody. To Foy, it was just screaming hepatitis. But Koh told us that Chinese patrons will reject a plate of hum if they don't see any blood, while the vice versa is true for Malay or Indian customers, and for Foy and Thurner, who prefer their cockles cooked all the way through. "Cockles contain very high amounts of iodine; they require a sharp wine to cut through the flavours," Foy advised, while Thurner marvelled, "The Sauvignon Blanc is really going well with this dish! In fact, the Riesling and the Grüner Veltliner 'Berg' pair well too, because they are elegant, mineral, not too powerful, and lean. The Grüner Veltliner 'Lamm' is a little too rich for me."

Strictly speaking, our Asian food and wine pairing exercise should have ended here, but Foy was growing more and more adamant by the minute that we order a fillet of stingray to pair with the wines. "It's my favourite!" he kept telling me. This widely popular dish is usually prepared by marinating a fillet of stingray in a sambal chilli mixture and then wrapping it up in a banana leaf before setting it to grill until the meat is juicy and tender. A spritz of lime just before eating heightens the flavours. Two factors make or break this dish: The freshness of the stingray, and the quality and flavour of the sambal sauce. According to Foy, a sure sign of freshness is when the meat of the stingray easily tears away from the soft bones, as was with the stingray we shared. Thurner got all excited after a bite and was very impressed by the wonderful flavours. He shared as he took more and more bites, "I'm not hungry, but I love it! I would call this an Austrian wine dish. It's got to be the Sauvignon Blanc and the Grüner Veltliner 'Berg'. The Sauvignon Blanc is just, wow!"

Rounding Up

When it comes to chilli and spice, Foy recommended that white wine is the best solution. This is especially true for seafood, as he explained, "The acidity content is high enough to match with seafood. Today we have five dishes and four wines, we have the luxury of choice. But any good acidic white wine will work well for this kind of seafood, and Asian cuisine in general." Thurner agreed. "Seafood," he elaborated, "is food grown in salty water, so the answer is dry, white wines with natural acidity and minerality. These are elements you have to look for. Austria is lucky to be in a cool climate to be able to produce wines with natural acidity." Natural acidity is something that Thurner cannot emphasise enough, as many winemakers in the world tend to add acidity to their wines to improve their quality. He continued, "In general, the Grüner Veltliner is one of the greatest food wines in the world. It is not as one-dimensional as a Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc is. A Grüner Veltliner has many different flavours, and has the ability to match a lot of different ingredients. Coming back to these four wines, these are great choices I would have in a restaurant. They are on the very aromatic side and have good minerality, which can go with many of these dishes." Could it have been a better food and wine pairing exercise? Suffice to say, I left the meal happy as a clam. KL

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