



# The growing vine

The liberalisation of trade in Vietnam and changing demographics in society have spurred a new wave of wine appreciation in the country. **Chris Canty** talks to some of the pioneers behind this trend

**T**ake a stroll through Hanoi's Old Quarter and French district and don't be surprised to see framed wine lists displayed prominently at fine dining restaurants or small boutique wine shops located among traditional Hanoi businesses.

The Vietnamese might now have a great choice of wine, but it never used to be like this. And no one knows about the early trials of Vietnam's wine industry more than the small first wave of expats who created the trend almost single-handedly.

When Bobby Chinn, owner and chef of one of the city's most well-known restaurants Bobby Chinn, came to Vietnam from California in 1994, wine selections were extremely limited. "I remember a red wine from the Czech Republic. It drank like a red wine vinegar, so we added 7-Up and vodka to turn it into a Sangria," he says. "The attitude was 'You're in Vietnam, beggars cannot be choosy'."

Donald Berger, considered by many as

the pioneer of Vietnam's wine industry and owner of the Vine Wine Boutique Bar & Café featuring Vietnam's largest wine list, has similar impressions. When he arrived in 2000, "the wine lists in the hotels and restaurants were dismal," he says. "The US\$4 yellow label Bordeaux 1994 was everywhere, and I didn't even believe this disgusting product came from French grapes." The Vietnamese interest in Bordeaux was seen as a remnant of the previous French occupation where drinking it was associated with the upper class, but the terrible quality and the fact that most wine was often left under the hot Vietnamese sun in open markets angered those who knew better.

Berger even suggests that the Bordeaux they drank "wasn't a Bordeaux but a fabricated alcoholic beverage created to deceive a naive market".

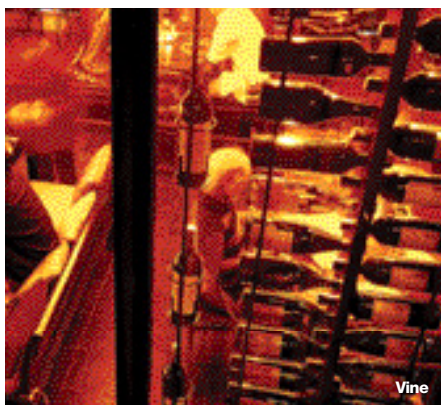
It was not until the last few years, when Vietnam started to further open up to foreign trade, which in turn spawned a new

demographic of Vietnamese who sought high-quality wine rather than culturally popular beverages like cheap beer and strong spirits, did restaurants and wholesalers begin to offer better and better merchandise.

Stores such as the Warehouse and the goliath supermarket Metro were quick to enter the game and stock up on an impressive range of high quality wines to a public that for the first time could afford it.

Berger (who described the current climate as "another world"), as well as a select few of other expats, were clever in choosing the inventory to import, bypassing the majority of Old World regions, instead paying special attention to New World wines from Australia and South America that were the result of excellent crops.

And wineries were also eager to enter the relatively untapped Vietnamese market. Darren Gall, of the Wise Winery in Margaret River, Western Australia, explains why he decided to send his wine to Vietnam. "The framework and



signposts for increased or potential increased wine consumption are there for all to see; the opening up of the economy, a burgeoning middle class, higher personal wealth, growth in international education, growth in international tourism and growth in international trade."

What's interesting is that instead of drinking any wine, the Vietnamese have developed a taste for the premium award-winning variety, which Gall attributes to the status symbol of being seen with a fine wine, rather than the European culture of drinking wines produced in bulk to accompany daily meals.

Kien Nguyen, a local solicitor who spent six years in Australia, returned to Hanoi to find an array of options. "In the past, I only found ordinary French wine in Hanoi, but in Australia, I developed a taste for their wine that was of a far better quality. Back here, I was told about the Warehouse and continued my love of quality New World wines. There is an excellent choice now in Hanoi."

Coinciding with this development is the increasing popularity of Vietnam's relatively unknown labels. Produced mostly in the fertile Da Lat region, local varieties have traditionally been ridiculed, with the reds being described as tasting like dirt, and the whites something even more unpleasant.

Even now, Chinn says diplomatically: "I use it for my red wine sauces and braising. Give it more time, and I am sure I will be marketing it and selling it to customers. Everything needs time."

Having judged Vietnamese wine at the International Wine Challenge Vietnam for the

past three years, Berger points to the staggering success of the country's rice and coffee production as an example that "Vietnam will be able to some day produce a significant amount and quality of grape-based wine."

But even if the standard isn't quite there yet, the fact that more Vietnamese wine is available in stores is good for the industry. Roger Gaffney, manager of the Warehouse, says domestic wines "are very important, as not only are they an important niche agricultural export product, they also serve to further bridge the gap between the more traditional spirits and beer".

But while industry expats are to be thanked for Vietnam's wine industry, they realise that it is the Vietnamese themselves who are the key to the future. Berger, Chinn and Gaffney all conduct seminars and tastings and regularly train their local staff at least once a month, giving the locals a better understanding of what they are drinking and serving.

Wine growers such as Alison Kelly of the Fermoy Estate in Western Australia, also makes the effort to teach the locals with regular trips to Vietnam acknowledging that "there is a lot of education that needs to be done to help the sales people representing us".

With more choice, more aficionados of the grape and more money entering Vietnam than ever before, when looking at the apparent rosy future of the country's wine industry, who better to ask than the person most regarded as responsible for starting it? Berger says: "Hanoi now has a very vibrant wine appreciation culture. The Vietnamese market and appreciation for wine is growing faster than a vine." ■

## GRAPE VENUES

### RESTAURANTS

#### Bobby Chinn

With his eponymous Bobby Chinn restaurant, overlooking Hoan Kiem Lake, the chef-restaurateur introduced hip chic dining (note the contemporary Vietnamese art on the walls) to a town that was ripe for the concept. His wine list features great Californian labels to suit his noticeably California-style cuisine.

**CONTACT:** 1 Ba Trieu Street, Hoan Kiem District, Hanoi, tel 84 4 934 8577

#### Green Tangerine

This beloved French-Vietnamese restaurant, housed in an old colonial French building in the heart of the Old Quarter, has welcomed a long line of dignitaries including Jacques Chirac. But despite the prestigious clientele, dining here is surprisingly affordable. As the cuisine is French inspired, so is the wine list with regions such as Roussillon, Bordeaux, Bourgogne, Loire and Alsace represented. Wines from Australia, Chile and South Africa are also available.

**CONTACT:** 48 Hang Be, Hanoi, tel 84 4 825 12 86

#### Le Beaulieu

For atmospheric dining, this restaurant in the five-star Sofitel Metropole Hotel is the visitor's usual first port of call. While Hanoi's respected Chef Didier Corlou no longer works full time here, he still holds the position of chief consultant overseeing the menu that lightly blends traditional French with Asian. The wine list is excellent starring a variety from Australia, New Zealand and Chile. But most guests come for the unparalleled range of fine French wines, including standouts from Bordeaux such as the Château Mouton Rothschild, Pauillac (1990) at US\$1,000 per bottle.

**CONTACT:** Hotel Sofitel Metropole, 15 Ngo Quyen Street, tel 84 4 826 6919

#### Vine Wine Boutique Bar & Cafe

Hanoi's "home of wine" doubles as one of the country's best restaurants. Owner Donald Berger has carefully selected over 1,000 varieties from Western Australian, Canada and Chile to choose from. Vine's elegant cellar room can accommodate up to four diners. Its Vine Annex hosts wine tastings, lectures and special events at least once a month.

**CONTACT:** 1A and 3 Xuan Dieu, Tay Ho, Hanoi, tel 84 4 719 8000

### RETAIL

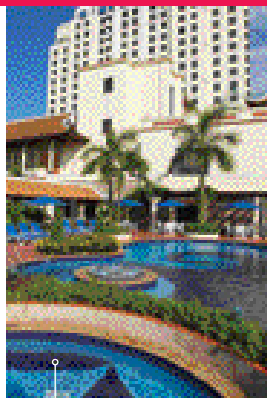
#### Warehouse

Among the city's huge expat community as well as local aficionados, it's known as the place to head to for both Old and New World varieties as well as familiar French labels. The staff is well trained in offering suggestions. Wine tastings and workshops are offered.

**CONTACT:** 59 Hang Tong, Hanoi, tel 84 4 928 7666



## HANOI HOTELS



	HANOI DAEWOO HOTEL	HILTON HANOI OPERA	MELIA HANOI	SHERATON HANOI	SOFITEL METROPOLE HOTEL
<b>What's it like?</b>	A repository of Vietnamese art, featuring 2,000 paintings and sculptures. Has hosted Clinton and Putin among others.	Graceful columns and mansard gables shout Paris, but the interiors are thoroughly, unmistakably Oriental.	A well run establishment that has all the tools required by the discriminating business traveller.	Lush gardens and tranquil courtyards create an unexpected oasis – great especially after a packed day.	A must for any first-time visitor to Hanoi. One of the few hotels that has remained true to its colonial past.
<b>Where is it?</b>	In the business and diplomatic district overlooking Thu Le Lake and 10 minutes from downtown.	In the heart of the business district and near major office buildings, government ministries and shopping areas.	Centrally located in the business and diplomatic district, with its own parking annexe for up to 250 cars.	Along the city's picturesque West Lake, 10 minutes from the downtown and 25 minutes from the airport.	In the heart of Hanoi, near Hoan Kiem Lake and the Opera House.
<b>How many rooms?</b>	411 guestrooms including 33 suites.	269 guestrooms and suites, including rooms for the physically challenged.	288 guestrooms and suites, including one room for the physically challenged.	299 guestrooms and suites.	235 guestrooms in the newly renovated Metropole and Opera wings.
<b>Room facilities</b>	High-speed internet access, cable/satellite TV and movies, valet service and free newspaper among others.	Individually controlled air conditioning, fast internet access, IDD phone, minibar and coffee/tea making facilities.	Broadband internet access, IDD phone/fax lines, spare phone line and power point for computer among others.	Sheraton Sweet Sleeper Bed on levels 15 and up, high-speed internet access and voicemail among others.	Sofitel MyBed, broadband internet access, 32-inch LCD TV, shower stalls and iPod with Bose SoundDock System.
<b>Dining</b>	International, Mediterranean, Chinese, Japanese and a 19-seat delicatessen.	Vietnamese, international and a café or casual dining.	International, Vietnamese with an emphasis on seafood and a delicatessen too.	International and Vietnamese with a European twist.	French at the celebrated Le Beaulieu and Vietnamese at Spices Garden.
<b>Bars</b>	Three – Lobby Lounge, Lakeview Sky Lounge and a bar-karaoke-disco.	JJ's Sports Bar with a pool table and dart boards, and the lobby lounge.	Lobby lounge and the alfresco Latino tapas bar featuring salsa and South American music.	Nutz Fun Pub with a light snack menu and the lobby lounge.	Met'Pub, Le Club Bar and Bamboo Bar.
<b>Business facilities</b>	The Grand Ballroom for up to 400 can be split into several meeting rooms; 10 function rooms and two boardrooms.	Business centre offers services like typing; free Wi-Fi in the lobby; two ballrooms for up to 500, several meeting rooms.	Secretarial services, the pillarless Grand Ballroom for 1,200 and meeting rooms of varying sizes.	Secretarial services including translation; the Grand Ballroom takes up to 600; several meeting rooms.	Secretarial services, broadband internet access, colour printer and computer; meeting rooms for up to 250.
<b>Leisure facilities</b>	An 80-metre outdoor pool and a sun terrace, gym, aerobic/dance studio, spa and golf range; tai chi and yoga.	Fitness centre, sauna, whirlpool, massage, Jacuzzi and an outdoor pool with its own snack service and bar.	Fitness centre, outdoor swimming pool and gift shop.	Gym, tennis court, sauna and spa and massage services.	Fitness centre, outdoor swimming pool and massage services.
<b>Price</b>	Late September internet rate of US\$159 nightly for an Executive Floor Room.	Late September internet rate of US\$170 nightly for an Executive Floor Room.	Late September internet rate of US\$131 nightly for an Executive Suite.	Late September internet rate of US\$95 nightly for an Executive Room.	Late September internet rate of US\$189 minimum nightly for a Classic Room.
<b>Contact</b>	360 Kim Ma Street, Ba Dinh District, Hanoi, tel 84 4 831 5000, <a href="http://www.hanoi-daewoohotel.com">www.hanoi-daewoohotel.com</a>	1 Le Thanh Tong Street, Hanoi, tel 84 4 933 0500, <a href="http://www.hilton.com">www.hilton.com</a>	44B Ly Thuong Kiet Street, Hanoi, tel 84 4 934 3343, <a href="http://www.solmelia.com">www.solmelia.com</a>	K5 Nghi Tam, 11 Xuan Dieu Road, Ho Tay District, Hanoi, tel 84 4 719 9000, <a href="http://www.sheraton.com/hanoi">www.sheraton.com/hanoi</a>	15 Ngo Quyen Street, Hanoi, tel 84 4 826 6919, <a href="http://www.sofitel.com/asia">www.sofitel.com/asia</a>