

Double happiness for wine lovers in Xuhui

— 2 new store on tap

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While local tastes increasingly turn toward imported wines, actually buying the stuff is still a bit of a tricky proposition. While the number of specialist wine stores has in fact improved of late, the selection on offer has still been either limited to the usual suspects found everywhere else or simply cheap plonk barely worth the space used to store it.

The situation, however, is steadily improving, and this week saw the opening of two new stores with markedly different approaches. Both are retail arms of local distributors and are both located within the vast boundaries of Xuhui District, but the similarities don't end there: Tianlin Road's Wine mall is a sprawling retail outlet aimed at bulk buyers of its selection of Old and New World wines, while Ferguson Lane's Pudao: The Wine Way is a more modest space ideal for anyone looking to pick up a bottle or two on the way home.

With 600 square meters, Wine Mall is certainly one of the largest specialist wine stores in Shanghai. This may appear staggering, but it is a subtle reminder that size takes on a different context here when considering this is nowhere near the largest on the Chinese mainland — its sister operation in Wenzhou (Zhejiang Province), opened in January, is twice the size at 1,200 square meters.

The store, part of the SVA Surpass Park, currently lists about 500 to 600 labels and this is expected to swell to nearly 1,000 over the next 12 months. Most of the wines on offer are imported by Global Beverages Asia, which is the result of a merger between Shanghai Xingxia Trading and the stricken TBC.

While many key brands migrated to other distributors, the new company GBA has managed to consolidate its remaining portfolio, which includes brands such as Trios and Ironstone Vineyards and is pushing them through this massive retail space. It also hopes to work with more local distributors in coming months to add to its selection.

Aimed at young, local wine lovers, the project is spearheaded by retail marketing guru Stephen Kulmar. One of Australia and New Zealand's best-regarded experts in the field, Kulmar has taken his winning formulas from liquor stores such as Dan Murphy's and applied it here.

The wines are displayed in three distinct sections — a supermarket space where row upon row of wines are stacked together, an exhibition space where the top picks are given more prominence, and a seminar tasting room where top cuvees will be tasted and promoted.

According to marketing manager Joey Tan, the goal of Wine Mall is taking the mystery out of shopping for wine. Education will be of great significance, although the company has no qualified educators on the payroll. Instead, pamphlets with helpful tips on tasting and specially selected three packs will offer wine novices a no-frills, no confusion approach to enjoying the beverage.

This packages, which will change regularly and come with tasting notes for customers to reference as they sip on their purchases, offer a discount on buying all three wines separately.

As far as pricing goes, Wine Mall offers a three-tiered pricing structure — one price for a single bottle, another price for a mixed case of six bottles, while an event cheaper price charged for a straight half dozen bottles. Bottles start at 73 yuan (US\$10.70) for a S. Orsola Spumante (sparkling wine) and go up as rarer vintages are sought.

Customers who join the membership program will also be awarded one point for every yuan spent, which will be redeemable for more wine later. The mall also stocks wine paraphernalia, and has a walk-in cooler for cartons of beer and spirits.

Wine philosophy

Still in Xuhui District but closer to downtown is Pudao: The Wine Way. A 90-square-meter project from the owners of Summergate and replacing its Cellar Door home delivery program, the puntastic Pudao is an elegant, sophisticated solution for those who prefer to avoid supermarkets when buying wine.

Local wine lovers will instantly recognize Marcus Ford, previously restaurant manager at M on the Bund. The eloquent wine guru is in charge of not only promoting the 400-plus Summergate labels but also handpicking 150 labels from other distributors to fill in the cracks.

Unlike Wine Mall, Ford has no target demographic in mind, preferring to be as appealing to as many people as possible. He does, however, also talk of eliminating the mystique when buying wine, and has installed a number of “shortcuts” for the bewildered first-time buyer.

The first involves two Enomatic machines, the instantly recognizable wine dispensers that store wine under inert gases and allow for expensive wines to be sampled. Pudaο members purchase a stored value card, and can pour themselves a tasting sample of one of 16 wines on offer. The current selection starts at 7 yuan for a tasting (38 ml) of Villa Wolf Riesling and goes up to 134 yuan for a thimbleful of Ridge Montebello.

The other shortcut also involves a mixed packaging, in this case of six bottles. Ford cherry picks the labels he feels go best together and sells them as a set; each pack also comes with tasting notes prepared by Ford himself.

The selection on offer reflects Summergate's position as one of the leading distributors in the country, although a few gaps do appear. Champagne, for example, is under-represented (especially compared to their neighbors Globus Wine) but in the coming months the company will announce the listing of Pol Roger. Pudaο will also supplement this with Champagnes and sparklers from other houses, such as Ayala and Tattinger.

Ford has also selected a local wine, Silver Heights from Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, to be listed from next week. The wine costs about 200 yuan and is very reasonable for the Bordeaux blend with just 1,000 cases made.

The store also holds a temperature-controlled cellar, where more prestigious cuvees are on offer.