

## Awards of Excellence 2016: Overseas Development Program (ODP)

### **Participants – Mohamad Fazil (Wines of Portugal Sommelier of the Year)**

#### *Travel Experience*

I was delighted to find out from World Gourmet Summit (WGS) that the award winners from Awards of Excellence (AOE) will be enrolled into the Overseas Development Program (ODP) that was organised by World Gourmet Summit with the excellent support of Singapore Tourism Board.

Being a lover of Italian wines, my scholarship trip to Cantina Marabino, Sicily, made me appreciate Italian wines even more. However my only concern was that it would be such a pity to fly thousands of miles just to visit one winery, hence, I decided to make a few calls to a few wineries. Once I got a few wineries to host me, I planned a 12 day itinerary that covered the important wine regions in Italy. I travelled from the north to south region, from Veneto to Emilia Romagna to Piedmont, then to Liguria, Tuscany and made my final pit stop at the beautiful island of Sicily.

Below I have made a few notes of my discoveries during my 12-day trip:

- The Valpolicella region makes red wines ranging from light and fresh nouveau style to full-flavoured and alcoholic Amarone that is made from drying grapes on straw mats. Polentas, risotto, stuffed ravioli with ragout sauce are popular dishes here. Popular meats consist of pork, beef and chicken meat. Horsemeat is a specialty in this region because it warms the body, although I did not get the chance to try it. I noticed that Veronese cuisine is heavy in general and consists of a lot of red wine, due to the cold climate. Alcoholic wines such as Amarone are popular among the locals most likely because it helps keep locals warm during cold winters.
- It is common to find parmesan cheese, high quality balsamic vinegar, thick flat pasta and lots of pork (parma ham) in Emilia Romagna. The most interesting pairing I noticed was the combination of parmesan cheese, cured meat or ice cream with balsamic vinegar (beautiful combination actually). In addition, sparkling Lambrusco from dry to sweet works well. This is also where the best restaurants in Italy are located. Sadly though, I did not get to taste the star of the region, Albana Romagna DOCG, a still, almost orangey white wine. This is the first white wine to achieve the highest wine appellation DOCG status in Italy. I fully intend on trying it in Singapore or when I am back in Italy.
- In Piemonte (or Piedmont), I found two very traditional dishes, one of which is Agnolotti, a square-shaped pasta which is filled with vegetables or meat, made with beef broth. Vitello tonnato is another well-known Piedmontese dish that consists of sliced veal covered with a creamy sauce. Both dishes are sometimes garnished with Alba truffles. The wines of Piedmont are well-known especially the moscato, gavi for whites and the two reds noble brothers, Barbaresco and Barolo. The white wines are fresh and aromatic while the reds are big and heavy which probably is a sign of a long maturity period. When the wines mature, they give out a mushroom-like aroma much like truffle, which directly reflects the abundance of truffle farming that the region is also known for. Of course there are also

other wines being produced there, like the sweet and dry sparklings with medium-bodies and fresh Barbera & Dolcetto reds.

- Located next to the Mediterranean Sea, Liguria has the luxury of access to fresh seafood. Pesto Genovese (pesto sauce made with pine nuts), minestrone soup and focaccia bread are popular dishes here. Liguria is also known to grow and frequently use fresh herbs like rosemary and basil. With a Mediterranean climate influence, Liguria produces mainly whites from Vermentino that range from fresh and light to medium style with subtle oak influence. You can also easily get rosés, sparkling and light- to medium-bodied reds here.
- In Toscana or Tuscany, saffron can be easily found. Locals tend to order bistecca alla fiorentina on special occasions, which is a Florentine-style steak that comes from Chianina cattle that tastes heavenly when paired with a magnum of big bold Brunello di Montalcino Riserva. Cinghiale in dolce forte is a stew dish which is made with wild boar and wine, slow-cooked in herbs. Although I don't eat pork, I've heard this dish goes well with Chianti and Morellino di Scansano. Whites from Vernaccia and sweet wines from red Aleatico grapes are something less mainstream and a must-try with a complete meal serving of starter and dessert.
- Italian espresso and grappa are necessity accompaniments to a meal as it acts as fantastic digestives to end off the heavy meals I've enjoyed with my Italian friends. It is also a fact that Italians makes the best coffee in the world – one of the main reasons why Starbucks did not survive in Italy upon opening for a few months.

After this educational trip, I am now more familiar with the names and styles of each Italian grape varietal and what they are used for. Some of the wine legislations were explained clearer when I met the wine makers in person, widening my knowledge of Italian wines and helping me provide better recommendations to the restaurant diners as well as improve my performance and duty as a sommelier. I would say the journey from Venice to Pisa was the highlight of the trip. Before this trip, I did not know exactly how tedious and time consuming the process of making balsamic vinegar was, until I met a Lambrusco producer who showed me the meticulous process. Witnessing its legally-binding traditional process and tasting it was indeed an eye-opener.

My colleagues have seen that I worked hard to win the award and in return I get to travel, visit places and gain experience professionally and personally. Some are already seeing the benefits of my hard work, study and self-improvement. This positive effect will hopefully drive the team to go out there and gain more knowledge, which in turn will improve the operation, guest service experience and revenue of the restaurant as a whole. To start, I already have a page dedicated to Italian varietals in my wine list at Salt Grill & Sky Bar. I am confident that our Italian wine selection is going to be more interesting in the following months. I have also planned an Italian wine staff training session for the restaurant group that I oversee to spread the love I have for my job and the passion I have for wines.