

Music for the palate

He started out picking grapes with his mother. Now Stephane Soret orchestrates the pairing of food and wine for diners

Eunice Quek

For Raffles Hotel's wine director Stephane Soret, the task of pairing food and wine is like conducting an orchestra.

He says: "Like a conductor, my role is to harmonise the blend of both aspects and the pair should speak for themselves without any fuss."

Raised in the wine-producing region Provence in southern France, the 40-year-old bachelor was "naturally in touch with food and wine" since he grew up surrounded by vineyards. He used to pick grapes with his mother.

When he was 20, he started cooking during his two-year diploma course in culinary and food service before enrolling in a professional French sommelier diploma course in Nimes, southern France.

After graduating from the CMH-Paris Hotel Management School, he moved on to work in luxury hotels in Paris, London and Dubai, making sure that he immersed himself in different cultures exposed to wine.

Prior to starting work at the Raffles Hotel in July last year, he spent two years in New Delhi, India, as head sommelier at luxury hotel The Imperial.

This being his first time in Singapore, he is keen to share his passion for wine and has been putting together a comprehensive wine programme for the hotel's 18 restaurants and bars as well as its banquet and catering facilities.

He is also involved in The 15th Annual Raffles Hotel Wine, Food & Arts Experience, a culinary, wine and art event from Jan 27 to 31. The first three days of the event are sold out.

What do you love about your job in the wine industry?

Wine is a subject that allows me to challenge myself, go on a quest for knowledge and share my discoveries with others.

What is the most challenging part of your job?

Simplifying wine, which is a complex and lifetime subject of learning. It is the

WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST MEAL BE?

Cote de boeuf (beef rib steak), os a moelle (roasted marrow bones), crispy fries and fresh butter lettuce salad at Chez Denise – La Tour de Montlhery in Paris. They are open round the clock and serve wine from a barrel.



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Mr Stephane Soret believes in sharing whatever he learns about wine with others.

creation of a wine-centric culture at Raffles Hotel, which begins from the selection and buying process to ensure that only the best wines are selected and stored in proper conditions, the tailoring of wine lists to each restaurant's food concept by working closely with the executive chef, to serving the right wines at their prime at the right temperature with the right pairing. All this can be executed only by overseeing the training of my team of sommeliers to ensure that they know the story behind each wine.

What makes a good wine?

Harmony and a sense of place. I like to select wines that are indigenous to their territory such as the best aromatic Rieslings grown in Alsace or from the Rhine region of Germany. As for sauvignon blancs, I prefer those from New Zealand as they are vivid, fresh and vibrant.

A good wine comes from a winery that has had a minimum of 20 to 40 vintages in perfecting their wine. It takes years to cultivate and perfect a grape that reflects its sense of place. A good wine also stems from quality – it starts from grapes grown in the vineyards with minimum human intervention.

Which is your favourite wine?

Any one that I am looking forward to drinking. It depends on the time of the day, my mood, the situation, whether it is for business or pleasure, the location... Oh, and it must go with food.

How do you decide on wine pairings?

Through trial and error, as well as from experience. One example is my introduction of a Provence rose wine at the Raffles Courtyard to go with chilli crab, and



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light reds to match the delicate flavours of fish. Who says you cannot drink red wine with fish? Lighter bodied wines are more friendly with food pairings as they allow you to enjoy them between bites without having your palate saturated with overpowering aromatics.

To someone tasting wine for the first time, what would you recommend?

The white Gruner Veltliner from Austria. It is a food-friendly, light-bodied white wine with very pure minerality, spicy and grapefruit notes.

Are you an adventurous eater or drinker?

I am always willing to try new things, which includes both food and wine. I am very keen on Northern Indian cuisine, especially dhall makhani served with naan fresh from the tandoor oven, and bhartha, which is roasted eggplant with gravy.

Do you like Singapore hawker food? What are your favourite hawker places and dishes?

I like the fried prawn noodles at Toa Payoh Lorong 1, the black carrot cake and oyster omelette at Newton Circus, and the chilli crab prepared at the Raffles Courtyard.

What is always in your fridge?

A non-vintage blanc de blancs Champagne (ideal serving temperature at 8 deg C) because I believe one does not need a special occasion to drink champagne.

If you could invite anyone (living or dead) to dinner with you, who would it be?

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, a French gastronome and epicurean famous for his book, Physiologie Du Gout (The Physiology Of Taste). I grew up reading it, and it inspired me on my culinary and wine journey.

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