

## ***The continuing adventures of Bungalow Bill...***

The hustling bustle of Saigon, now the official name of the business district of Ho Chi Minh City, is not the first place you would expect to find boutique wine. In fact with a crippling tax rate on wine of 100%, and a population that lives off \$60 per month you don't expect to find any wine.

The Vietnamese drink beer and cognac — the former to be sociable, the latter on special occasions. In fact, cognac is so popular among Vietnamese men that many suffer from liver problems. The Vietnamese will often tempt a westerner into a cognac drinking game which leads to the inevitable raging hangover.

Wine, excepting rice wine, plays no part in traditional Vietnamese culture. The long ship voyage and lack of refrigeration stymies its transport to Vietnam. The wine that somehow survives the hot journey is too expensive for ordinary Vietnamese, anyway.

Wine is a luxury, almost as far out of reach to a local as a brand spanking new Nissan 350Z is to a struggling wine writer.

So then no hope of a story for winefightclub while on holidays...

Then you see it, on *Louis Pasteur Boulevard*, just across the road from the former seat of the South Vietnamese government.

You see a red sign, not the usual banner of the communist party, but the advertisement for a bourgeois wine shop- '*The Warehouse.*'



# winefightclub



You say to yourself...'*That looks like a copy of a euro wine store.*'

In fact it is a copy of a euro wine store. A copy complete with tonnes of brushed stainless steel, sandstone racks and a glass fronted foyer.

Air-conditioning is mandatory for wine in Vietnam- the tropics are a sweaty sea of 32°C and 90% humidity. *The Warehouse* building is sealed and refrigerated to a constant temperature. The whole building is like a cool room. This environmental control makes the store sweet mercy for the wine loving traveller. It makes the perfect place to find a dark corner and rattle off an article. The air-conditioning helps me think better...

## Is their hope selling trying to sell wine in Vietnam?

The short answer is yes.

Firstly, to start with I made a mistake about tax in the opening paragraph. The tax on wine isn't 100% anymore. The Vietnamese government agreed in 2003 to reduce tariffs on wines and spirits in two stages: from 100% to 80% in January 2004, and from 80% to 70% in January, 2005. Vietnam's agreement also eliminated minimum import pricing and additional duties on wines and spirits going through the process of customs.

Secondly, while the locals don't have the taste or income for wine the country is full of people who do- they are called tourists- *Ong tay* in Vietnamese.

According to statistics from the Vietnam National Administration for Tourism, about 81,000 visitors from the UK arrived in Vietnam 2005, a 14 per cent increase from the previous year. The UK is Australia's biggest wine market. Britons drink Aussie wine at home why not abroad?

## Insider the WAREHOUSE



**Red is an interesting colour choice for a logo in one of the last remaining communist countries.**



**Sandstone, brushed stainless steel and that nice twisted black metal stuff.**



**Henschke, D'Arenberg & Yalumba... Always welcome in your cellar (or better on the dinner table).**

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Travelers from Australia and the United States are also increasing with total tourist numbers in excess of 2.5 million per year.

As luck would have it, as I am sit hiding from the Saigon city sweat streets, my translator points out that one of the other customers in *the Warehouse* is Robyn Eckhardt. Robyn is an American who writes food articles for Vietnamese and other Asian newspapers freelance. She also edits the Eating Asia website.

So I press the red button on my tape recorder and pose the question of what she thinks about *the Warehouse* and wine buying in Vietnam.

*'I shop once or twice a week here. This is the place to stop for a BYO bottle if you're headed for one of Saigon's stonier restaurants, where wine lists are pretty anemic, or if - like me - you're an ex-pat in a country with ridiculously high duties on alcohol and want to carry home a few.*

*When the Warehouse opened a bit over two years ago, it offered little to impress the prospective wine purchaser - other than a radical industrial chic interior. The wine selection was slim and ridiculously weighted to the upper end of the price spectrum, and the manager was, quite frankly, a real wine snob - the type that sniffed haughtily at us whenever we walked in the door in shorts and thongs.*

*Hey, I learned to love wine in San Francisco, where one isn't expected to dress up to make a booze purchase.*

*About a year ago, however, a new manager arrived on the scene and things began to change for the better. Stock expanded greatly, and there was more attention paid to "value" wines -- not cheap necessarily, but good quality for the money. There's still an emphasis on French wines, but now plenty of decently priced Aussie and NZ bottles as well.*

*Most of the major wine companies from the EU, US and Australia have distribution here. You can pick up the usual suspects like Jacob's Creek, Penfolds and some family producers like Henschke or Yalumba.*

*My major complaint is that the staff is hopelessly clueless when it comes to wine. Why doesn't management train these people, some of whom have shown their staying power for over a year? So unless the French manager is around you won't get much guidance. But at least the Warehouse is now producing the occasional pamphlet with tasting notes. There is hope.'*

Comparing prices with the two biggest Asian wine markets is an interesting exercise. In Hong Kong and Singapore there is a significant domestic wine market- both consumption and for collecting bottles for status. These markets attract much activity from wineries trying to gain export sales. However wine is more expensive in these Asian powerhouses than in Vietnam.

So if you are a tourist wine drinker wandering around with your 'foreign' money you will enjoy relatively good value wine. And if you are trying to sell wine in Vietnam look no further than tourists- or wandering journalists to be the core of your sales.

## **Price Check... d'Arenberg Laughing Magpie 2004.**

Country	Price in local currency	Price in US dollars
Vietnam	440,000 dong	\$ 27.50
Australia	\$ 24.40	\$ 17.80
USA	\$ 19.99	\$ 19.99
Hong Kong	\$ 257.03	\$ 32.90
Singapore	\$ 39.50	\$ 33.22
Canada (British Columbia)	\$ 28.03	\$ 25.08
UK	10.50 pound	\$ 19.99

### **Winefightclub**

**What are we fighting?**

**Ourselves...**

**Plus 85% of the wine industry is controlled by six companies. 60% of all wine shops are owned by supermarket chains.**

**Your favourite winery has been sold, the site gutted, the equipment auctioned and the staff retrenched.**

**Only the name remains.**

**Enough! Someone had to fight back. There is more to wine than profit. We knew we had to act. We gathered all the best small wineries we knew and winefightclub was born.**