

Best Hidden Gem Sommelier Series: Jonathan Farr of Shanghai 1930

By Jeannine Sano

Shanghai 1930 has completely shattered two of my previously held prejudices about dining: (1) that Chinese restaurants do not generally offer elegant fare; and (2) that restaurants offering entertainment tend to have limited culinary expertise. I could not have been more mistaken. Despite the fact that the sleek bar area, glamorously highlighted with sky-blue back lighting, looks more like Miami than San Francisco, with live jazz presented nightly, the true star of Shanghai 1930 is the flawlessly spiced, gracefully articulated menu. The kitchen team led by Executive Chef Jason Xu, prepares tantalizing combinations of crunchy, creamy, hot, cold, spicy, sweet, savory textures and flavors with tightrope balancing precision. Indeed, chef Shirley Fong-Torres (whose walking tour of Chinatown, www.wokwiz.com, is a must-eat event for all residents and visitors of San Francisco) has proclaimed Shanghai 1930 to have the best Peking duck in the City. While I have not tried nearly as many Peking duck variations as she has, I have to agree. I also loved the fish-on-a-vine, moist white fish, crispy-fried to golden perfection, in a sauce of verjus, soy, and ginger, garnished with sweet red

seedless grapes, as well as the rich and meaty, fork-tender, braised five-spice pork shank. Shanghai 1930 even has a separate members-only private cigar lounge called the Guanxi Lounge.

If there were an area where Shanghai 1930 had a weakness, it might have been its wine list, which tended to concentrate on heavily oaked Chardonnays and expensive name-brand Bordeaux, which made for a list of impressive labels, but did not always complement the varied spices and complex flavor profiles of the cuisine being turned out by the kitchen. Enter Jonathan Farr, Shanghai 1930's wine director, transplanted from South Beach, bringing with him his flare for lighter, brighter wines to truly highlight and complement the restaurant's stellar food.

How did you get into wine?

I started out as a waiter. One of the owners of the first luxury hotel I worked in South Florida loved Italian wines, especially Barolos. We had a cellar selection of over 500 wines, and I got to work with the master sommelier on the property. I eventually moved into management and continued to focus on learning about wine and beverages.

How does San Francisco compare with Miami?

Vodka is the drink of choice in Miami, which has more of a party atmosphere all the time. In San Francisco, I find that people have a higher appreciation for cognacs, cigars and wines, with much more scrutiny on food and wine pairing. I love the long list of single malt scotches at Shanghai 1930.

What changes have you made to the wine list since coming to Shanghai 1930?

I am working on expanding the list to create greater variety to match the cuisine. The biggest challenge has been finding wines to match the sauces. For people who like red wine, New Zealand Pinots work well, as well as Washington State blends from Columbia Valley, although there are people who still want the First-growth Bordeaux with a wok fry.

What is your best selling wine?

People seem to love California Pinot Noirs, the really jammy kind.

What is your favorite wine?

I am a big fan of New Zealand

Sauvignon Blancs. The zippy acidity is very complementary with a lot of different types of food.

What's your favorite Chinese dish?

I love dim sum. I'm not used to getting that in Florida. When I'm not working, I cook Spanish omelets for myself. I also enjoy Wood Tavern in Berkeley. They have the most amazing pork chop, a great value for your money.

What do you drink when not working?

That changes depending on the company, the setting, etc. I do like scotch, though.

What would you say is the toughest challenge you have had to deal with since coming to Shanghai 1930?

Chinese food is almost always like a banquet with a lot of people ordering a lot of different dishes. Trying to find a wine to match five or six different dishes, with different sauces — sweet, spicy, rich, light — can be tricky. Not to mention, there is customer preference to take into account. Are most or some of the people at the table adventurous? Do they want to stick with their familiar staples? People who are

adventurous with food tend to be adventurous with wine, too.

Do you have a favorite food and wine pairing?

I would say scallops with a Pfalz Auslese [Riesling].

What information do you find helpful in selecting wines for people?

Wine is very dependent on context. So I like to find out whether people are here on business, for pleasure, vacationing from Europe or Asia, or residents from the area.

Is there any wine you do not like?

I don't dislike any wine, although there is a wide range in Malbecs, and some can be tough to drink.

Between the wine expert and wine novice among customers, do you have a preference?

I like learning from all types of people, and wine is very personal. There is never a wrong answer.

Shanghai 1930: 133 Stewart St. (near Mission); lunch Mon-Fri from 11:30 a.m., dinner Mon-Sat from 5:30 p.m.; 415-896-5600

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