Lucky number eight

Eating Out

NZ's finest wines make way into Asian region

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EIGHT is not only considered a lucky number for the Chinese but also for Misha's Vineyard, a New Zealand wine producer.

According to its director Misha Wilkinson, they have Chinese history on their vineyard and everything on the vineyard seems to be in eights.

"When we found the land, it was just a big sheep farm and we thought we were the first people there.

"However, we found out that in 1860s-1980s the Cantonese were here; they first went to Australia for the gold rush in 1960s and later came to New Zealand," she said.

On the vineyard, eight clones of Pinot Noir have been planted in two row directions: 288 degrees on the slopes and lakefront terrace and 341 degrees (which adds up to eight) on higher terrace.

"The land was originally known as Sheep Run 238. We found out that we were 8km from the nearest town of Cromwell, with a high population of Chinese.

"We thought we had better respect our Chinese history and put the first eight grapevines and eight Chinese gold coins into the ground; it is to return old gold to the land to bring new gold," she said, adding that Pinot Noir is also called new gold in Central Otago.

On more lucky eight coincidences, she said the first vintage (which refers to harvest) from their vineyard was in 2008.

"There are 88km of rows on the vineyard, not by design but by accident.

"The first Pinot Noir we did received a score of 88 by the most celebrated journalist in New Zealand; it now has a rating of 93," she said.

She was also told that the land is very auspicious as it is in a great feng shui position.

Tasteful: Savouring good food that goes well with the wine.

"The land is in a horseshoe or armchair position, with the mountain at the back, ridges at the side and a long skinny lake in front.

"When we told the story to Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, they thought the wine must be really lucky and we did a special label for them and it is called Lucky Eight Pinot Noir and they wanted it for their high-rollers club as they think it will bring good luck to the people who went to the casino," she said.

The symbol of gold and the number eight is also included in the design of the wine bottles.

The gold top is a symbolic of the gold coins they buried in the ground during the ground-breaking ceremony.

On the label, there are eight rows of vines and eight bunches of gold, which symbolises the eight clones (subspecies) of Pinot Noir.

This attention to detail attests to their promise to establish the vineyard with no compromise.

"We do everything by hand. Even for the brochures and packaging, we don't cut corners because we are trying to make the most premium product of New Zealand that we can," she said, adding that they are one of New Zealand's most spectacular vineyards.

One of the Pinot Noir is named 'High Note' given by Misha due to her background in theatre and her mother who was an opera singer.

Misha wanted to be a ballerina but was considered too tall. She later joined the corporate world, in particularly marketing.

"I ended up in technology, which was good training but it was not where my passion lies

"You come to this point in the cooperate world that you say, is that all there is? Is it fulfilling enough for me?" she said.

Hence, 10 years ago, Misha and her husband Andy Wilkinson ventured into the wine business.

Both were in the corporate world and some were curious how they got into the wine business despite not being wine makers themselves.

"It is okay, you cannot do everything yourself. We hired the best viticulturist and the best winemaker Oliver "Olly" Masters, who is the most famous Pinot Noir winemaker," she said.

Despite being one of the newer players in the industry, the brand has gained quite a recognition such as being named as one of New Zealand's most exciting up-and-coming wine producers.

"We have only completed five vintages (harvest), we are still quite new but we are doing very well.

"One of the most prestigious wine magazine in the world is *Decanter*, a UK wine magazine, picked us as the top 20 producers from 700 wineries in New Zealand and we are the youngest in the list," she said.

Misha shared, "Here's an interesting fact: There are 33 million sheep but there are 100 million grape vines, hence we should be remembered for our wines, not sheep."

Misha's Vineyard have exported their wines to Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and have just gone into the China market.

"While many New Zealand wineries are exporting to London and the Northern hemisphere, we think that it makes more sense for us to focus on the Asian region.

"The wines we make in Central Otago, which are cool climate wines, are fresh, crisp and delicious and works well with the exotic Asian flavours such as Chinese, Malaysian and Thai

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A toast: Winemaker Masters (left) and Misha were in town recently for the launch of Misha's Vineyard Wines in Malaysia.

Recognised in its branding

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food," Misha said.

Finlux Sdn Bhd was appointed as the exclusive distributor in Malaysia. According to Finlux executive director CK Chew, frozen food is their primary product and Misha's Vineyard is the first wine they are distributing.

"The reputation and growth of New Zealand wines has been rapidly increasing and Central Otago is an up and coming area in New Zealand in terms of quality of wines. The Misha's Vineyard range of wines for our small but growing portfolio, is recognition of the quality of the wines and their premium branding," he said.

The premium wines will be available in fine dining restaurants and hotels. Whites are priced at RM88++ and the Pinot Noir is RM128++.

At the launch, guests enjoyed Misha's Vineyard wines with dinner prepared by Chef Max Chin at Millesime, Solaris Dutamas.

Prior to dinner, diners sampled canapes and sipped on 2009 Dress Circle Pinot Gris.

Compliments to the chef on the Sumac Rubbed Tuna Loin Seared Rare with Caramelised Endive Salad Pacific Crab Meat "en Tartare", Horseradish — Saffron Aioli and Parmesan Cracker, which was paired with the 2009 Starlet Sauvignon Blanc. The strong flavours of Poêlé of Goose Foie Gras on Pedro Ximenez Sherried Apple Soubise Cider — Honey Vinaigrette tossed Portabello Mushroom, Beetroot Mimosa was complemented with The Gallery Gewurztraminer 2010.

Next we had Hokkaido Sea Scallop with Emincé of Gulf Sea Prawn in Saffron Beurre Blanc Duck Fat Sauteed Russet Potato Brunoise, Celery Garnish and Keta Caviar.

For main course, diners were given the choice of Loin of Venison with Savoy Cabbage with Braised Oxtail and Spiced Poached Packham Pear, Cepe Mushroom Ravioli and Chocolate Oil; or Golden Snapper Fillet Cassoulette, Sweet Turnip, Shallot and Humboldt Asparagus in Mirepoix and Pinot Noir Reduction.

Gaining reputation: Misha's Vineyard wines available at fine dining restaurants and hotels.

Both the scallop and main course was paired with the 2008 High Note Pinot Noir.

For dessert, we were served Crisp Kataify Pastry Wrapped Cherve Goat Cheese with Macaroon, Silver Rum, Raspberry Coulis with Pumpkin, and Honey Ice Cream.

The 2010 Limelight Riesling, which has aromas of crushed lime, flint and five-spice, was my personal favourite. It went well with the dessert but could also be enjoyed on its own.

For more info, visit *www.mishasvineyard.com* or contact Finlux at *finlux@pd.jaring.my* or 03-7729 4733.

■ *This is the writer's personal observation and is not an endorsement by* StarMetro.