

WHY Wine

A brief tour of the world

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Here is a brief tour of what I had a chance to taste in recent weeks. No sangria despite Spain's brilliant week in sports, but a very interesting Thai red, the Orient 2009 Syrah; and a rich red from southern Italy, the Rosso del Conte. Added to it was a small bottle of Korean sojhu with excellent Korean food, of course.

The heat encouraged me to indulge in two or three glasses of beer, probably not the most friendly beverage to quench a tropical thirst. This with some cheerful carbonara and Thai-style omelets cooked by my maid of so many years.

The sojhu went, of course, with Korean food, somewhere near Time Square in Bangkok, our pleasure divided between the quality of the food and the vast smile of the waitress. This was all shared with a friend who came from Phnom Penh to share the latest gossip from the Cambodian capital.

Sojhu is very much like sake, may be a bit sweeter, and can be made from rice, but also wheat, barley, tapioca and potatoes. It travelled to Korea by way of the Middle East, and is now in danger of being supplanted by brandy and wine. So my friend and I did our bit to protect this endangered species.

If you want to learn more about sake and sojhu you can buy The Insider's Guide to Sake by Philip Harper. He must be one of the few producers of sake in Japan. From there a trip to Korea will no doubt add a final touch to your education.

The Orient 2009 Syrah is a very generous red from the GranMonte winery in the Khao Yai region. Despite its 14 percent content, it seemed light on the palate, and the people with whom I drank this bottle found it very much to their liking. The wine was made from grapes planted in 1999 and was the work of Nikki Lohitnavy, a graduate from the University of New South Wales in Australia.

The wine itself brought - to me at least - very pleasant memories of the Cotes du Rhone, of Chateau Neuf du Pape, of the time I knew no greater satisfaction than travelling slowly from northern to southern Europe, in quest of light, warmth and affordable wine. You knew you had crossed an important

border when the price of a bottle of mineral water was higher than that of a simple red.

I never had the chance to meet the Conte, the count who presides over the destiny of Tasca d'Almerita, which seems to be one of the wineries to watch in Sicily. Apart from the red Rosso del Conte, they also produce a wine called Cygnus (already mentioned in this column).

An ancient villa in Palermo, once known as Villa Camastra, became the centre of wine presentation and high life. Richard Wagner apparently enjoyed both the wine and the villa, where he composed an entire act of Parsifal.

Chateau d'O has less ambitious musical dreams. But the idea of staying a few months in Sicily, composing and sipping wine, merits further consideration. May be it is time to dust off that old treatise on counterpoint I kept during my many trips. Just in case...

Email: chateaudo377@gmail.com