

## Gourmet Heaven

Teddy Montelibano discovers an outpost of fine dining and excellent wines north Manila.  
Photography by Tiger.

From the outside, Building 1988, a white, immaculately-painted, green tile-roofed bungalow, looks just like other structures alongside the same stretch within the Clark Special Economic Zone, site of the former US airbase, Clark Field, in Pampanga, some 50 kilometers north of Manila.

Its unassuming exterior, however, is just about all that it shares with neighboring buildings along Mimosa Drive, in the Zone's Mimosa Leisure Estate. Nothing about how it looks on the outside quite prepares you for what awaits as you step inside its handsome, well-appointed interiors.

Indeed, currently, there is nothing quite like the Yats International (YI) Wine Club—whether in the country or, arguably, in the entire Southeast Asian region. Certainly, no one but the most passionate of oenophiles could have assembled the number and quality of vintage wines stored within its perpetually-cooled vaults. And there is only one way by which anyone could describe, albeit inadequately perhaps, owner Denny On Yat Wang's regard for wine: with consummate passion.

It is not easy to hold one's composure as one steps inside the temperature-controlled wine cellar built in a corner of the Grill Room, the Wine Club's main dining room. Stacked on wooden panels constructed and shipped in from Hong Kong and which now stand, from floor to ceiling against the cellar's walls, are Wang's treasures—an estimated 30,000 bottles of wine, including a rare 1900 vintage Chateaux Margaux, the crown jewel in his collection. That particular bottle, one of only four existing in the world today, already cost Php 1.062 million when Wang bought it on auction in 2001.

“Two backup generators are linked to the wine cellars so that in the event of a power outage, any place in the Wine Club may be without power but not the Cellar,” Gerry Garcia, legal administrative officer for YI Leisure Philippines, the YI Wine Club's mother company, informed me.

The excellent vintage wine collection in Wang's cellars is, indeed, a sight to behold and I reel as Philip Golding, the multi-awarded chef extraordinaire who lords it over the Wine Club's gourmet kitchen, runs me through it, pointing at legendary Bordeaux grand crus, burgundy grand and premier crus, vintage champagnes, top Medoc grand cru classe, fine vintage cognacs and armagnacs, fabulous Bordeaux whites, rare sweet wines of the Loire, dessert wines such as sauternes and barsac, and so many others that could transport wine connoisseurs into a state of bliss. All these, I was made to understand, are offered to Wine Club members at prices well below those asked for by other wine outlets in the country and the region.

“Are all for sale,” I queried, “including that one?” pointing specially at Wang's prized catch, the 1900 Chateaux Margaux. Golding smiled, a bit sheepishly, and said, “Any bottle but that. Quite frankly, I don't know if Denny would be willing to part with it.”

In another room, named the Chef's Dinning Room, could be found almost a thousand bottles of fine vintage port racked up likewise against the entire expanse of a wall. This is where guests who dine to specially designed menus prepared by Golding are served, and where the latter holds private cooking lessons or demonstrations for members and guest the Wine Club.

Except for the 100-person capacity Grill Room, the Chef's Dinning Room ( which is also aptly dubbed the Port Room and particular other rooms given names like the Magnum ( where magnum bottles of wine are stored and displayed ), the Bordeaux ( where power meetings by businessmen members of the Wine Club brokering mega-business deals are held ), the Sauterne ( which is the powder-cum-shower and dressing room in the Wine Club ), and the state-of-the-art Boardroom are all exclusive to Wine Club members.

The assemblage of wines in the YI Wine Club may be oenophile's dream, but foodies will be just as ecstatic when presented with Golding's sublime menu. To be sure, the choice gustatory offerings are all a worthy match for the superb vintage wines that can be had-needless to say, at a handsome price-in the Club.

An indication of Golding's culinary genius and the select quality of wines found at the Club may be gleaned from a signature gourmet menu he put together for a club member and his guests. It started with pan-fried French turbot accompanied by white asparagus flown in from Holland. The Spears he drizzled with an arugula and red wine dressing, followed by smoked bacon lardoons-sprinkled New York clam chowder. Both were matched by Pouilly-Fuisse, Dom. Sangouard 1998.

Next came the mouthwatering entrees: a choice of +9 grade Wagyu beef tenderloin from Australia, grilled over lava rocks and brushed with a lentil Du Puy and Isigny buttered glaze, served with broccoli and pepper cream sauce: oven-roasted Cornish game hen, served with Spanish alba truffle mashed potatoes, pickle of radicio travis cabbage, gherkins, and glazed asparagus green in Cabernet Sauvignon sauce: char-grilled New Zealand venison chop alongside wild rice pilaf and lightly poached Italian baby savoy cabbage; grilled fresh pumpkin in a vintage port wine reduction sauce; and pan-roasted French foie gras with agaricus blazei mushroom risotto, lightly-grilled ballon aubergine and Yorkshire buttered Holland fennel bulb with a sauce of Asian black truffle.

The recommended wines for the entrees choices were Chateau Clos de Jacobins, Grand Cru Classe, St. Emilion 1979; Chateau Yon-Figeac, Grand Cru, St. Emilion 1985; Chateau Plince, Pomerol 1979; and Chateau La Cabanne, Pomerol 1978.

Then offered to the dinning patrons were cheeses from Golding's signature gourmet selection, which included English Stilton with fresh grapes and salted almonds, as well as premium French blue cheese varieties like Bleu de Lagueville and Bleu de Causses.

The sumptuous meal was topped by La Collection, a dessert concoction of classic lemon cheesecake with wild berries, vanilla ice cream, with toffee prunes, apple crumble with cinnamon ice cream, and chocolate sauced citrus meringue. The libation suggested at this juncture was Chateau Suduirault, 1er Cru Classe Sauternes 1995.

“Those aren’t even a third of what our kitchen can do,” Golding beams as we spoke at the Wine Club’s Grill Room during a recent visit. Earlier, he had proudly given us a quick tour of the Club’s well-organized kitchen storeroom stocked with all sorts of wonderful things-imported yogurt made from fresh unpasteurized milk; home-grown organic greens and tomatoes; freshly-prepared soups in stacks of clearly labeled plastic containers; homemade sorbets, breads and ice cream and-in limited quantities-pheasant, grouse, partridge and quails from Europe; goose liver foie gras from France; turbot; coral trout; hake; slivers of buttery-to-the-taste premium Wagyu beef from Australia; venison chops, Dutch veal, kangaroo fillets; and much, much more.

“We have all the best that the world can offer in terms of food and wine,” he says, proudly, “and all these are for our members to enjoy.”

Golding’s stellar background in the culinary arts is an ideal pairing with Wang’s erudite affinity for wine. The English chef, who hails from the United Kingdom (Windsor, to be specific), started his apprenticeship at 15. His kitchen skill were honed by stints at such luxury hotels as Hyde Park Hotel in London ( where he was sous chef ), as well as with Trusthouse Forte ( which sent him off for further training at various restaurants in Italy ), and such venerable French institutions as Ecole Lenotre and the ultra-exclusive Hotel Georges V in Paris.

He married Charlene Saldaña, a Filipina who was studying hotel and restaurant management in London and whom he met after she “slipped on my kitchen floor” in Tutto, an Italian restaurant he owned in the UK capital. In 1996, wishing to understand his wife’s culture, Golding came to the Philippines. He met chef/restaurateur Billy King, who convinced him to manage the sorely missed Paper Moon restaurant along Jupiter street in Makati City.

After Paper Moon, Golding, who is also, for the past nine years, an examiner for the Center for Culinary Arts ( CCA ), moved on to work in other establishments including Virgie Ramos’s ( now also defunct ) Fashion Café, Spargo, and Azzurro, where he presided in the kitchen before finally getting around to his present posting as executive chef and general manager of the YI Wine Club and VP for food and beverage of YI Leisure Philippines. The latter is a property development company whose projects inside the former US airbase includes the beautifully landscaped VinCafe garden restaurant in Wang’s Clearwater Country Club.

It is quite apparent that Golding is enjoying his current job to the hilt. He is happy to have the full support of Wang, whom he regards admiringly as a “Gourmand and a gentleman.” If Wang were a bottle of wine, said Golding, he would be like a “Crystal or Dom Perignon,” referring, respectively, to the ultimate Champagne produced by the 200-year old Champagne Loius Roederer for Russian Tsar Alexander II, and to the luxury, prestige cuvee of champagne by Moet et Chandon.

The very private Wang, who reports say has poured over Php200 million in investment in Clark, is described by his associates as “obviously a perfectionist, as can be seen by the high quality of maintenance given the projects he ventures into.” Associates described his venture into the fine wines and gourmet restaurant business as something that’s not too far removed from his personality, something which he pursued with absolute gusto.

Without doubt, Wang’s passion for wine and Golding’s brilliant culinary prowess make the two gentlemen a perfect match. Together, their collaboration at the YI Wine Club can only mean food fortune to members and guests privileged enough to partake of some of the best repast and libation in this part of the world.