

FRANKLAND ESTATE WINE DINNER

Olympian moments at China House

BERNIE COOPER



The refreshing 2006 Rivermist Riesling.



The elegant 2005 Smith Cullam Shiraz.

The Oriental's China House stands apart from the hotel in a converted colonial-style house renovated last year to stunning effect. Shanghai 1930 is the theme, with contemporary Chinese decor blended with art deco. The atmosphere is mysterious and exotic. The dining area extends upwards on ebony columns with the glow of red lanterns from the ceiling.

In a private room like a celestial cave with red walls embellished with ancient Chinese murals and calligraphy, a long table was decorated with *ping chuan* paper flowers like miniature Chinese trees. The table was laid for 16, eight at either side. The number, of course, was significant, for whenever Benjamin Wisootsat and Jan Ganser of Fin company adopt a theme, they'll allow no detail to escape.

The auspicious, 8800 opening date of the Games was expressed as a Chinese banquet of eight courses paired with eight wines, and as in Beijing, the proceedings started at eight minutes past eight on the eighth day of the eighth year of the centennial.

The wines were from Frankland Estate in Western Australia. The estate, in a remote area far from industrial intrusion, was founded by Bernie Cooper and Judy Cullam 20 years ago — in '88, of course, and the wines were chosen for their quality and their compatibility with Chinese food.

The first was a crisp, refreshing riesling blend, 2006 Rivermist Riesling, with a strong, mineral nose, floral and citrusy on the palate. It made an excellent aperitif and accompaniment to the first dish, which had five elements. Every item on the menu had a Chinese-related title, and this one was the Five Symbols, the five Olympic rings, their colours and the mascots. Fin had made matching mascots of their own, too.

"The blue one is Benfen, the water element representing dreams and the imagination," said Benjamin. "And this red one is Janlan, a friendly lion who seems to have a wine glass in his hand."

The cover of the menu shows two Chinese figures of indeterminate age sitting with their feet on a table, one holding a glass of wine. "There's an old Chinese proverb that says 'Friendship lasts forever with a glass of wine,'" said Benjamin. "Actually, it says 'tea' — but I cheated."

The five symbols on the plate were shrimp ball with almond flakes, crisp crab meat and minced pork wrapped in tofu skin, chicken fillets with honey lemon dressing, cummin scoured duck liver and chilled hawthorn lotus root jelly. Small, tasty parcels with many flavours, they were nicely balanced with the Rivermist Riesling.

The second wine was 2003 Chardonnay from the Frankland Estate's Isolation Ridge where all the wines are made organically. It is a barrel fermented, cool climate chardonnay, intense, generous, full-bodied and ripe with notes of oaky vanilla on the palate. It was served with a soothing traditional soup of spinach with strips of Yunnan ham.

The Chinese characters for the third course were a proverb translated as "A shy rabbit has three openings to its burrow." It was a fish course — a fillet of green wrasse covered with freshly grated ginger paste wrapped in a green, lotus leaf burrow. The dish was served with 2002 Isolation Ridge Riesling, which is frequently hailed as one of the best Australian rieslings ever. It is bright, tangy and vibrant with apple, citrus and mineral flavours, elegant and quite happy with the taste of ginger.

One of China House's signature dishes followed, roast Peking goose served in four ways to symbolise the Four Noble Truths which show the way to enlightenment. This led us to the first course of the evening, 2002 Isolation Ridge Cabernet sauvignon, deep ruby red, with dark fruit aromas and a clean, elegant palate with layers of fresh black currant, chocolate, cedar and subtle vanilla.



The first appetiser reflecting the five essential elements in life.



Benjamin Wisootsat, the lady behind the concept for this impressive wine dinner.

The roast goose had gradually moved from richness to lightness, and the lightness prevailed with the next course, abalone with the Scholar's Four Jewels, whose inspiration was the Five Tenets of Confucius. These, according to Benjamin, are power, benevolence, justice, wisdom and trust. And power and benevolence certainly shined up in the wine, 2005 Rivermist Shiraz. Spicy, plummy, peppery aromas were to the fore, with lots of fruit on the palate, sparked with a shot of Viognier to lift the flavour of this rich and welcoming wine.

Richness returned with "Never Give Up", a useful proverb if ever there was one. Pork belly in traditional style with sun-dried lettuce and taro was served in a clay pot, which gave it a nice affinity with 2002 Isolation Ridge Shiraz, which had its own earthy notes.

This is a wine that draws enthusiasm from all sides, a complex, cool climate shiraz focussed on ripe red fruit,

and spice. Boasting intense fruit with a creamy texture, subtle savoury and spice notes with a touch of earthy mushroom reminiscent of Burgundy, it successfully balanced the richness of pork while augmenting its flavour.

Wok-baked rack of lamb marinated in Xinjiang spice was an echo of the barbecued lamb with spices popular in Xinjiang, northwestern China. Xinjiang spices are led by cumin and have dried chilli and pepper in the mix.

There were lots of piquant flavours here, and a very special wine to mingle with them, 2005 Smith Cullam Shiraz. This was Hunter Smith's tribute to Bernie Smith and Judy Cullam who founded the winery, and 2005 marked its first commercial release.

An intense blend of 70 percent shiraz and 30 percent cabernet sauvignon, it offered blackberries and violets on the nose, with layers of dense fruit flavours and notes of tobacco and cedar on the palate. The fruit was not allowed to run riot; it was tightly structured but juicy, and warmly welcoming. A terrific choice for a spicy lamb dish.

Finally, Frankland Estate's flagship wine, Olmo's Reward 2001 came with Hidden Dragon, Crouching Tiger, crisp pancakes of red dates with anis dark chocolate ice cream.

The wine was named for the Californian viticulturist, Harold Olmo, who was the first to recognise the immense potential of the Frankland River region as great wine country. This tribute to his perspicacity is a blend of five Bordeaux grapes: 40 percent each of merlot and cabernet franc with some cabernet sauvignon, malbec and petit verdot.

While this is a wonderful, big, sensuous wine, its elegant poise and style never faltered. The nose is fragrant, with ripe fruit, exotic spices, chocolate and earthy notes; the palate is concentrated, smooth, and velvety delivering waves of flavour — black currant, mulberry, plums, cedar, tobacco and vanilla oak.

And so the opening ceremony at China House on August 8 drew to a close. In a day or two, on Sunday, August 24, we shall be watching the closing ceremony of the Games in Beijing, and in four years' time we shall see the opening of the next one, London 2012.

In the Land of Harry Potter, the magic is already being mixed to create an Olympic environment that might have a chance of rivaling this one. What, one wonders, will Fin have in mind for that?