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Wild Ginger

An Asian accent on wine and food in Seattle **BY HARVEY STEIMAN**

What wines go with Asian food? Wild Ginger has the answers, some 2,350 of them, on its wine list. The sprawling, 475-seat Seattle restaurant, celebrating its 20th year, has gradually built its cellar into a formidable storehouse of great, mature Rieslings, Syrahs and other wines that come into their own with chef Nathan Uy's modern take on Pacific Rim cuisines, from China to Thailand, Indonesia to Malaysia.

After all, what would you drink with "fragrant duck," the house specialty that seasons moist roast duck with cinnamon and star anise? Or rib-eye steak served with Thai basil and coconut curry? Or Szechuan green beans, another house specialty, bright with chile pepper? These dishes are brilliantly made, but they aren't exactly familiar fare for most Americans.

"Asian food is not a traditional wine match," allows Ole Thompson, wine director since 2003. "Young red wines clash, so we're much better off cellaring the wines. They work better when they are softer and more open. We cellar the German Rieslings, Alsatian whites and Southern Rhône, because they're more interesting with age."

The deep Riesling collection includes 1980s and '90s vintages from Fritz Haag, Dr. Loosen, Joh. Jos. Prüm, Willi Schaefer, Armin Diel and Bürklin-Wolf. Almost everything has at least five years in the bottle, and many are priced well under \$100. There are plenty of Burgundies, both white and red, with names such as Leflaive, Comte Lafon, Coche-Dury, Leroy, Denis Mortet, Joseph Roty and Domaine de la Romanée-Conti in profusion.

It doesn't hurt that Washington wines pair easily with the food. "The wines are perfect for us," says Thompson. "They have forward fruit and they're fleshy, but they have good structure and acidity."

Local names such as Andrew Will, Cayuse, Leonetti, Betz, Owen Roe and Quilceda Creek stud the list, and, from neighboring Oregon, Beaux Frères, Ken Wright, Penner-Ash, Argyle and Sineann. California Cabernets appear in deeper verticals than Bordeaux do. Prizes include Heitz Martha's Vineyard to 1966 (\$450), Caymus Special Selection to 1984 (\$250), Beringer Private Reserve to 1988 (\$170) and Dunn to 1989 (\$245). Bordeaux fanciers can find Margaux 1983 (\$700), Mouton 1975 (\$550) and Lynch-Bages 1979 (\$260).

Such markups are modest. Thompson and founder-owner Rick Yoder price the wines well below the median of what's in the market. The average price of a bottle sold in the restaurant is \$52. Even the older bottles mostly hover between \$75 and \$300.

"There are few pleasures on the planet like being in the company of people you care about, in a fine restaurant, drinking wines that fit the food and the setting," says Yoder. "When we got established,



An expansive collection of Rieslings ensures vivid wine matching at Asian-inspired Wild Ginger. From left: chef Nathan Uy, wine director Ole Thompson and co-owners Rick and Ann Yoder.

after the third year, I decided that to be a world-class restaurant we had to get serious about wine. We started to stockpile. We still have a lot of wines that don't even go on the list until they're ready."

Yoder has been buying more wine than usual in the past several years to stock a second Wild Ginger opening this fall in Bellevue, across Lake Washington from Seattle. The list will start with about 1,000 wines, many of them stocked in glassed-in display cellars. Special permission was required from the state liquor board to make a one-time transfer of the wines to the second license.

Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Syrah sell best, Yoder says. Wines that others might consider offbeat or off the radar "have always been our strength," he laughs. "When Riesling was not popular, we bought a lot of beautiful wines. Now we have them, and they are mature and at their best, and we don't have to charge a lot for them. We got into Syrah in the early 1990s, before it got to be a thing. These are very exciting wines to me, and we sell a lot of them.

"People look at the menu," Yoder continues, "and they are confused—'What do we drink with this?' That gives us a chance to please them with something they might not have expected. We try to build friends, not make a big sale once. We want them to come back again and again."

Wild Ginger

1401 Third Ave., Seattle Telephone (206) 623-4450 Web site www.wildginger.net Wine selections 2,350 Number of bottles 37,000