



Forbidden Fruit

CHAMPAGNE TURNED TEETOTALLER GEORGE TONG INTO A WINE COLLECTOR, WRITES ED PETERS

FOR SOME PEOPLE, collecting is a hobby. For others, “passion” is a more apposite term, as the accumulation of fine silver or fast cars or rare antiques takes over a substantial part of their thoughts, dreams and day-to-day conversation. But when it comes to George Tong, it’s fair to say that “love” is not too strong a word.

The vice president of Wong Hau Plastic Works & Trading grew up in a family that was strictly teetotal, so the first of his three collections – in which Dom Pérignon figures large – prompts mild surprise.

“We didn’t drink at all, although at weddings and banquets we attended I’d see the bottles of VSOP and XO all lined up,” Tong recalls. “Even in college I didn’t touch alcohol, but that all changed in 2002.”

Invited by Cathay Pacific to attend a dinner at The Peninsula – along with other Marco Polo Diamond members – that paired champagne and Chinese food, Tong’s interest was piqued. A year later, at a similar event matching oysters with champagne at the Sheraton, he underwent a mini epiphany.

“Champagne was the first wine I tried, and I remain more fond of it than any other,” says Tong. “You can take it out of the fridge and drink it more or less straight away, and it pairs very well with a whole variety of food, be it sushi or sashimi or whatever. I’m drinking Dom Pérignon 1990 at present; it ages very well. What’s more, wine is a useful conduit in business. If I am hosting a dinner, I’ll take along a bottle or two, something special that I reckon the guests will enjoy.”

Tong’s wine collection, which also includes some notable Bordeaux and Burgundy, is stored around the world, with some 8,000 bottles in his cellar in Hong Kong and rather more in bonded warehouses in the United Kingdom.

“I use three wine merchants in Britain: Berry Brothers & Rudd, who have been supplying the British royal family since 1760; Corney & Barrow, who also supply the Queen and the Prince of Wales; and Armit Wines,” says Tong. “I should think the collection is worth in excess of £1 million, but when I am looking to buy, the key question is whether I like to drink it. If I don’t like it, I won’t buy it, even if it’s a good investment.”

Hand in hand with Tong’s interest in wine runs a certain devotion to watches. Once again, it all started in 2002, and once again there was little in the way of past history.

“I’d been wearing the same watch since secondary school – a Citizen quartz,” says Tong, with a grin of reminiscence. “My wife, Kathy, bought me a Jaeger-LeCoultre Master Minute Repeater, and I liked it immediately.”

In the intervening years Tong’s watch collection has grown swiftly (as well as Jaeger-LeCoultre, he’s especially keen on Montblanc and Harry Winston). Rather than a Citizen quartz, he now sports a Grönefeld, a distinctive timepiece manufactured by Dutch brothers Bart and Tim Grönefeld. The model owned by Tong sells for about €30,000.

A naturally modest, gentle man, Tong becomes increasingly animated as he describes how the watch is put together, pulling it off his wrist to display its interior, which is visible through the glass caseback.

“I don’t just want to own something, I want to understand how it works, otherwise there is little point in owning it,” he says. “Some people I know collect cars, but if you’ve got 10

AT A GLANCE

IN SHAPE

Tong exercises regularly by weight lifting and playing tennis

JET SETTING

The avid collector once shipped four bottles of wine from Hong Kong to New York to enjoy at an exclusive dinner

HANDS-ON

Tong pays annual visits to wineries and watch manufacturers; he enjoys experiencing the terroir and meeting the master watchmakers who assemble his watches



cars you need 10 parking spaces, plus you need to maintain them. I can keep 10 watches in a drawer, and I wouldn't be surprised if they are worth more than the 10 cars."

Tong is not alone in collecting watches in Hong Kong; he has added to his stock, and to his knowledge, thanks in part to regular gatherings hosted by watchmakers and patronised by those similarly keen on timepieces.

"As an investment, watches may go up or down; you are not necessarily going to make a lot of money out of them," he says. "Some manufacturers produce a limited edition, and then produce a second limited edition, with only very minor alterations. This really doesn't benefit anyone, so I am careful with what I buy."

The third strand of Tong's collecting habits involves jewellery – but not anything he wears himself, despite the current popularity of jewellery for men.

"The jewellery collection is for Kathy; she wears it at events and functions," he says proudly. "We've been married for 26 years and choose pieces together, though it always seems to be me who ends up paying."

A broad smile indicates that Tong does not find this part of the process in the least bit onerous. "Kathy really likes Van Cleef & Arpels and Chanel, but what we are both looking for is good design, and we really appreciate craftsmanship, whether it's a clip or a brooch or rings or a necklace."

Showing a similar appreciation for craftsmanship in other fields, Tong reverently

"The key question is whether I like to drink it. If I don't like it, I won't buy it, even if it's a good investment"

picks up an empty bottle of Dom Pérignon Oenothèque 1962, bought at a silent auction at a Jockey Club dinner in 2003, and signed with a charismatic flourish by Benoît Gouez, who has since moved to Moët & Chandon as chief winemaker. "Drinking it was amazing. There was an intensity from beginning to end. It's probably one of the finest bottles of champagne I'll ever drink," he says.

Collections can be little more than agglomerations of inanimate objects, but for Tong, two bottles of champagne have a very special meaning. And this is where the love comes in.

"Dom Pérignon Oenothèque 1964 is quite rare," he says, "and I had to search for it for quite a long time, but I have two bottles and I am especially fond of them – 1964 is the year my wife was born. I'm not sure when we'll drink them, but it will certainly be a special occasion." ■