

SPIRITO di VINO

Culture and Quality for a Luxury Wine-Style

Asia

Peter Lam *Trailblazer* of Gastronomy

A LOVER OF WINE
AND CUISINE, HE STRIVES
TO ADD INNOVATIVE
VIBES TO HONG KONG'S
DINING SCENE

CHAMPAGNE

*Maison Mumm
makes history*

EXCELLENCES

*Drive de Cartier
meets great Tuscan reds*

BAROLO

*The tale of
the King of Wines*

GOURMETS

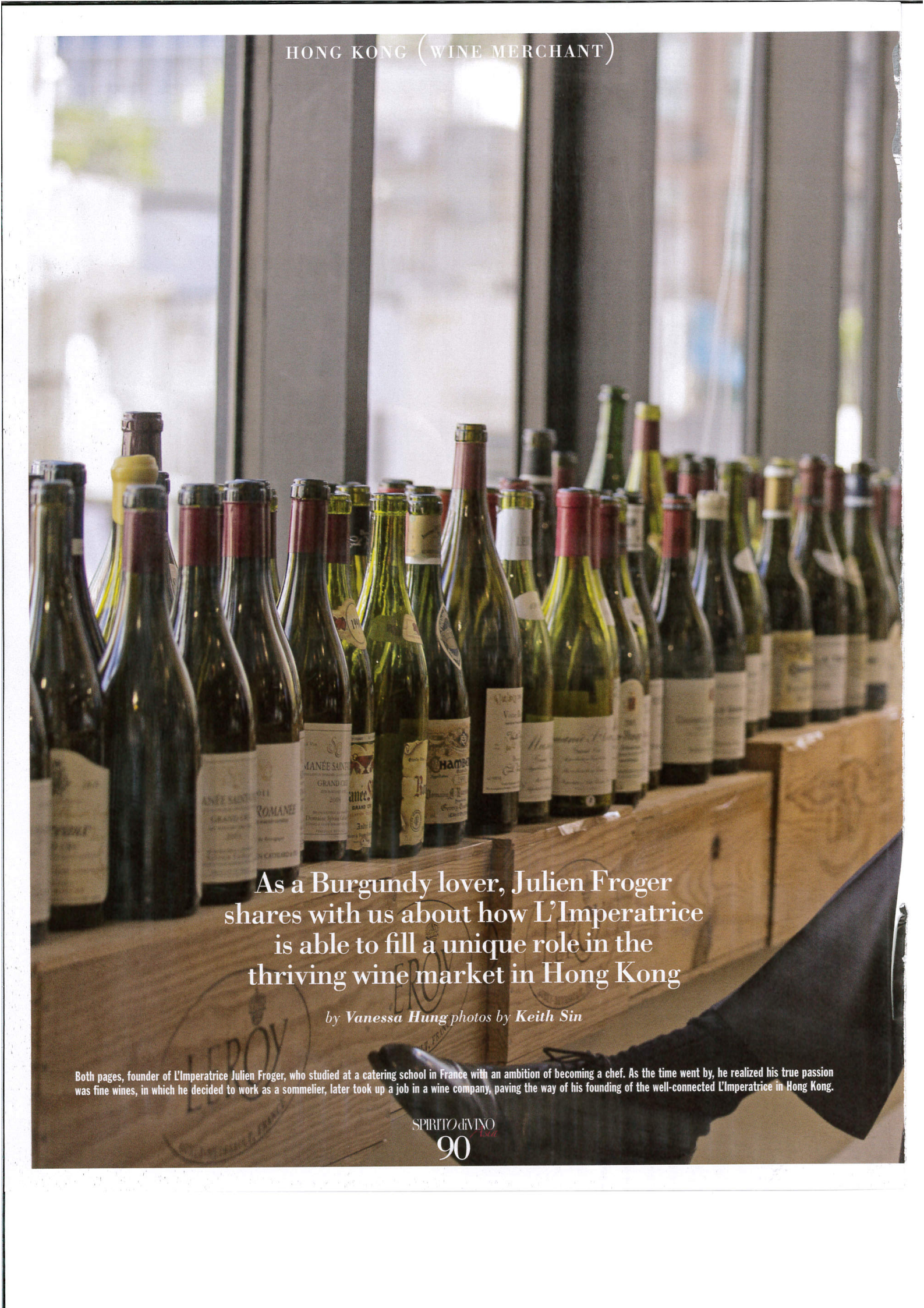
*An authentic
Chinese private kitchen*



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A photograph of a shop window filled with wine bottles. The bottles are arranged on wooden crates and are mostly green glass with white labels. The background shows a blurred view of the street outside. The text is overlaid on the lower part of the image.

As a Burgundy lover, Julien Froger
shares with us about how L'Imperatrice
is able to fill a unique role in the
thriving wine market in Hong Kong

by *Vanessa Hung* photos by *Keith Sin*

Both pages, founder of L'Imperatrice Julien Froger, who studied at a catering school in France with an ambition of becoming a chef. As the time went by, he realized his true passion was fine wines, in which he decided to work as a sommelier, later took up a job in a wine company, paving the way of his founding of the well-connected L'Imperatrice in Hong Kong.



Insatiable thirst
for Burgundy

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L'Imperatrice Eugenie, a legendary empress in France over two centuries ago, might not ring a bell for you. But this indubitably inspired Julien Froger, founder of a soaring high-end wine merchant in Hong Kong, L'Imperatrice. "This name came up during a holiday in Burgundy. I was reading about the history of the region, and learned that one particular empress in French history, l'imperatrice Eugenie, immensely adored food and wine, and always spread the word about good gourmet. Her passion is akin to our philosophy, which is, to keep searching and bringing the best of French wines to Asia."

Growing up in Lyon, Froger has always been an aficionado of Burgundy wine. Before jumping into the wine industry, Froger studied at a catering school where he realized his true passion lied in wine. Later on, he moved to London to work in a wine company. "Back when I was traveling to Europe for business, everyone in the wine industry was buzzing about Hong Kong being the paradise of wine trade because of its zero tariff. That's when I considered starting my business in Hong Kong." Froger made a bold choice by setting up L'Imperatrice in Hong Kong that specializes in delivering hard-to-source French wines.



The early experience of being a sommelier has benefitted Froger that he established amiable relationships with numerous wine traders. "When I first arrived to Hong Kong, the market was widely dominated by Bordeaux wines. People in Hong Kong didn't have many options." By the time when Froger established L'Imperatrice, curious wine lovers in Hong Kong were increasing, which rendered it a perfect timing for Froger to introduce more Burgundy wines to hungrier consumers. L'Imperatrice specializes in both high-end and prestigious French wines as well as lesser-known labels. Currently, it represents around 70 producers from Burgundy, Grouer Champagnes, Rhône Valley, Savoie, Languedoc, Beaujolais, Loire Valley and California. "We are proud to represent some prestigious labels such as Domaine Leroy, Domaine Anne Gros, some small growers in Champagne and highly-regarded French estates." Their main clientele spreads across hotels, restaurants and private clients. "We work with three-Michelin-

starred restaurants such as Caprice and Otto e Mezzo Bombana; but to me, it's not about the stars. We want to ensure that the sommeliers share the backstory of the wine producer with the consumers."

Boosting lesser-known winemakers into greater recognition is what Froger wants to achieve as well. Cécile Tremblay was one of the many wine producers that Froger was eager to start collaboration with. "When I first visited her in 2005, nobody knew about the label. Tremblay is the grandniece of Henri Jayer, the world-renowned French vintner who introduced innovative Burgundian winemaking techniques. Her wines are hard to acquire because she produces limited bottles each year. It took me four years to have her on-board." Froger couldn't help but reflected his sense of delight. Cécile Tremblay was successful in making a name for herself partly because she was able to steadily transform the vineyards, in which that she took over from her family, from bad conditions to now certified organic vineyards. She produces such as Echezeaux du Dessus Grand Cru, Vosne Romanee 1er Cru Rouges du Dessus and Chambolle-Musigny Les Cabottes that are elegant and aromatic with rich and seamless texture, demonstrating that a true master is at work. She is now considered to be Burgundy rising winemaker in the same vein as Lalou-Bize Leroy.

Being a pioneer in the wine industry is also essential, as Froger said, "By the time wine critics start writing about a wine, it is already too late." Froger searches hard for new producers and strives to be ahead of wine critics. Froger hence visits Burgundy every year in order keep himself abreast of the up-and-coming wineries and other hidden winemakers. The most arduous task is to convince the winemakers to sell the limited bottles to L'Imperatrice. Froger opted to import wines from Savoie when only a few wine merchants in Hong Kong did. "We want to be the trailblazer and continue to put new brands forward to the market place." Froger expressed. For instance, Domaine Gilles Berlioz, Chignin is an unfamiliar label in Hong Kong, yet it is a unique wine that is full of characters and potential. The estate is planted with local grape varieties such as Mondeuse and Persan, and the grape varieties are planted according to the characteristics of each terroir.

L'Imperatrice also imports a few natural wines, in which Froger believes to be the next wine trend. For instance, Froger spoke highly of Domaine Marcel Lapiere in which winemaker Lapiere is a pioneer in natural viticulture and its winemaking process is based on the microbiological composition of the soil. Froger eagerly showed us the bottle of the 2014 Marcel Lapiere Morgon Cuvée, "It is elegant and has a vibrant red fruit character. The sublime expression of Gamay that is found in the wine is exceptional and is definitely worthy for a try." As same as L'Imperatrice Eugenie, Froger believes that it's requisite to spread the word about good wine. "We generate a lot of up-to-date wine news on wechat. Nowadays, we have to be extremely digital savvy." Froger said. Young, ambitious and determined, Froger truly grasps the strategy to make it in today's wine industry. Alongside a great team whom he is grateful to have, Froger is embarking an exciting venture of expanding L'Imperatrice in the Asia Pacific region. 🍷

This page, from left to right, 2014 Marcel Lapiere Cuvée MMXIV, Morgon, Gilles Berlioz Les Fripons, 2012 Sylvain Cathiard, Vosne-Romanée, Aux Reignosts, 1er Cru, 2012 Domaine Cécile Tremblay Les Beaux Monts, Vosne-Romanee Premier Cru. Adjoining page, Julien Froger is delighted to have Domaine Cécile Tremblay added to the portfolio of L'Imperatrice.

