

# KEEPING SCORE

American wine critic James Suckling  
shares his insights on Asia's wine industry.

By PAUL EHRLICH

**I**n Bangkok to host Asia's largest premium Italian wine tasting event at the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel, showcasing more than 120 top wines, famed wine critic James Suckling sat down with *Robb Report* to talk about why Thailand is an exciting new wine market and what bottles consumers should buy in the new year.

Suckling spends most of his time working for his website and promoting his wine glasses with Lalique.

**You say Thailand is poised to be a bigger wine market than China. Given the size of China, that will surprise many people.** My data is anecdotal. I asked almost all the top wine importers in Thailand how many consumers they thought paid US\$20 (657 baht) or more per bottle on a regular basis, which is my definition of a premium wine consumer. The figure I kept hearing

Illustrations LESHA KURBATOV



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was around 900,000 people. So I know for a fact that consumers who spend that kind of money is probably about 300,000. China is about the same. So that really prompted me. I said this is crazy. There are so many consumers of fine wine here. Probably a third or more are wealthy people travelling to Thailand. That has a huge advantage over China as well because Thailand is a great holiday destination and people are in the mood to spend money when they are here.

**For importers, what are the biggest challenges for this market? Is it the high taxes and the ability to find a distributor who will protect their brand?** There are always those problems in selling wine anywhere. So it’s finding a good distributor and working out the difficulty with the taxes, because it can be up to 400 per cent. But the prices in restaurants are not that much higher than in London or New York, where a markup on a wine list can be three or four times the wholesale price.

**Are there other Asian markets that are underrated and have great potential for fine wines?** Many wine producers are talking about Vietnam. Also Indonesia for the Chinese community there. The Philippines also has potential for growth, looking at Manila and the country’s many resorts. Singapore and Hong Kong are mature markets. But for me, I am focusing on Thailand, besides China and Hong Kong.

**What about Thailand’s burgeoning wine industry?** There are always the issues

Suckling has coordinated multiple Brunello di Montalcino tastings in the US.



of growing grapes, the climate, soil and humidity. But what I’ve tasted so far I’ve enjoyed. I gave Siam Winery’s Monsoon Valley White Shiraz 90 points. I find Thai wines more interesting than Chinese wines. What’s better than hanging out in a beach resort in Thailand and drinking Thai rose? Maybe that’s the new Cote d’Azur experience for Thailand!

**Globally, which underrated wine regions should consumers keep an eye out for?** Chile and Argentina have some fantastic, world-class wines. My wine of the year was an Argentine Malbec called Vina Cobos. This winery makes US\$20 bottles that taste like US\$100.

I also like New Zealand and Australia. They tend to have great value and quality, particularly New Zealand. Not just that syrupy Sauvignon Blanc but really great stuff like Chardonnay and Shiraz.

**What rising stars should consumers keep an eye out for?** Besides Chilean and Argentinian wines, everyone should buy 2010 Brunello. That’s one of the most famous wine types of Italy and 2010 is the greatest vintage. Then you should buy Pinot Noir from New Zealand – 2013 was an excellent year. And then I would probably try, just for something different, Riesling 2014 from Australia. Really amazing.

**Since leaving your long-term involvement with Wine Spectator in 2010, what are you primarily busy with?** My main business is JamesSuckling.com, an online web magazine. Each year, we taste about 10,000 wines and people



go to the site for ratings. Also we have HD videos of different vineyards, interviews with winemakers, my tasting reports. And then we do events. These are very important in my business. Like the recent ones in Bangkok and Hong Kong.

**What wines do you tend to drink often at home?** What we have in our cellar. But usually Brunellos, Bordeaux. We drink wine everyday.

**For your last meal, what would the food and wine be?** It would probably be something straightforward. Probably Korean barbecue, with all those different tasting side dishes, and a great Barolo such as Bruno Giacosa or Giacomo Conterno. I'd be really happy.

[www.jamessuckling.com](http://www.jamessuckling.com)

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Vina Cobos makes terroir-driven wines mainly with Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon in the different winegrowing regions of Mendoza.

