



SEASONS Susan Jung

Liquid heaven Water apples go by many names, including wax apples and rose apples. I prefer the first one, because it describes the crisp, thirst-quenching quality of the fruit. The water apple is available in many colours, ranging from pale yellow-green to deep red. No matter what its colour, though, the fruit is bell-shaped and has glossy edible skin. The texture of the flesh is similar to that of the starfruit; it's not nearly as crunchy and firm as most varieties of apples. Also like the starfruit, the water apple isn't that flavourful - it's mildly sweet, but really quite bland. The fruit is prized because its high water content makes it refreshing.

The water apple is grown in tropical and semi-tropical climates, including many countries in Southeast Asia and East Asia (I've seen the tree growing in wild and urban areas of Hong Kong).

It can be eaten out of hand, like you would an ordinary apple, discarding the core and seeds. But to serve it more elegantly, cut it into wedges and remove the core. To perk up the flavour, serve wedges of the fruit with a dip: *li hing wah mui* powder (made from salty-sweet dried plum) or a mix of granulated sugar, salt, chilli powder and lime juice, as they'd serve in Southeast Asia.

BOOKS Susan Jung

The Vegetarian Option

By Simon Hopkinson

It seems strange that one of the first recipes in *The Vegetarian Option* is for chicken broth. Simon Hopkinson, author of the excellent *Roast Chicken and Other Stories*, writes that the recipe is for carnivores "like me" who would want to use the stock in dishes of risotto and soup, but, he says, the vegetable bouillon recipe can be used instead.

I can see why vegetarians would be annoyed by the inclusion of that recipe; meat eaters can use many more cookbooks than can vegetarians, and surely they could consult one of those other books for a method on how to make chicken stock.

However, that a confirmed meat eater was able to write a book on vegetarian dishes that holds the interest of another omnivore (namely me) shows the appeal of his recipes.

Some recipes are obvious and too "light": caesar salad (without the anchovies) and onion and blood orange salad with olive oil. But others would be hearty enough for any meat eater: potato pie with Beaufort cheese; Oriental spring onion salad with radish, cucumber, cashews and vermicelli; fried aubergine with skordalia; and new season garlic, saffron and tomato quiche.

Picture: Shutterstock

UNCORKED Debra Meiburg

It's hard to imagine a business that releases a product only 37 times a century. Perhaps the model suits the grand designs of Airbus, Boeing or even Nasa, but champagne?

Salon, one of the world's most revered bubbly, is a case in point. Of course, it does produce another champagne range, Champagne Delamotte, to get it through the lean years, but don't assume Delamotte is a second-class wine: it's collectible in its own right.

Unlike most wine regions, champagne houses "declare" a vintage when they deem growing conditions have been perfect - or, in some cases, when cash flow gets a touch tight. In undeclared years they produce non-vintage (NV) bottlings, blending bubbles from several seasons to smooth out the vagaries of their chilly region. Salon is notoriously selective in its declarations. It was the only prestigious champagne house that refused to declare in the popular millennial year 2000, citing Europe's substantial summer heat during ripening.

Another feature of Salon is that it releases its vintages late in the game. Imagine producing an airliner and then parking it for 10 years before selling it. But that's Salon; only recently has this venerated champagne house released its 1999 vintage. And last year only 200 bottles were allocated to the Asian market.

"I get a lot of pressure from importers" says Didier Depond, president of Champagne Salon. Is it expensive? Of course, but "it is only the price of a new jacket", he says dismissively.

The concept of Salon was created by Eugene Aime Salon early last century. The wine was crafted for himself and a friend.

"The idea," explains Depond, "was to create a champagne derived only from chardonnay grapes, only from Le Mesnil de Oger and only in great years. The winter and spring can be very cold but the summer must have heat."

Interested in visiting Champagne? "You are welcome in Champagne," Depond says expansively. "After the Grand Hyatt, you just turn right [and drive] for 10,000 kilometres."

Salon 1999 Creamy texture, with fine, exquisite bubbles. There is only one word for this wine: finesse. Although already 12 years old, it is clear this wine will evolve and develop for a further 20 years. Rich but discreet, showing a fine hand with its yeast influence. Not exuberant. As Didier puts it, this is "really a fine white wine with bubbles. It's not only a champagne." Available for HK\$2,590 at Altaya Wines (tel: 2523 1945) ★★★★★

Delamotte Rosé NV Pale salmon colour with hints of small red fruits, such as strawberry and raspberry. Exceedingly quiet flavours with candle wax notes and dried flower accents. Firm structure and silky texture, in the sense of licking a scrap of silk. Fine, prickly bubbles. Available for HK\$550 at Altaya ★★★★★

Delamotte Blanc de Blancs 2002 Fine intensity, white flowers and hints of white nectarine. Minute, petite bubbles. Clean, tight, minerally, fresh, tart and vigorous with fine length. Elegant. Available for HK\$590 at Altaya ★★★★★

Delamotte Brut NV Classic blend, made from chardonnay selected only from grand cru sites. This is a quiet, gentle wine with delicate light madeleine biscuit aromas. Fine bubbles, fresh acidity, light floral hints. Though Depond suggests these wines can be served with a meal, in my view they are too delicate, ethereal and, well, pretty to risk on a food match. I do concur with his other recommendation, though: "My friend tells me it's an easy champagne to drink at breakfast, lunch and dinner." Available for HK\$298 at Altaya ★★★★★

Debra Meiburg is a master of wine (meiburg@debramasterofwine.com)

★★★★★ Best in class ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★★ Very good ★★★★★ Good ★★★★★ Drinkable

