

Wine: Sommelier

Brix talks with Sebastien Le Goff of Bistro Moderne in Singapore

By Lynda Grace Philippsen

This interview first appeared (in slightly different form) in

Brix: Where people, wine and travel mix (Volume 4, 2010)

Photo used with Permission of Claudette Carracedo.

<http://www.claudettecarracedophoto.com/>



claudette carracedo photo

Sommelier Sebastien Le Goff says that had anyone suggested in 1997 (as he prepared to leave Singapore) that he would return in 2010 to open and manage DB Bistro Moderne for Daniel Boulud, he would have said, “You’re crazy.”

In the 90s the Nantes-born twenty-three year-old Le Goff was out of money and jobless when Jeremy Choo of the French restaurant Vis-à-Vis in Singapore took him on. With his education in international trade and business administration, Le Goff thought it would be a temporary thing, but he “fell in love with the hospitality industry.”

From then on Le Goff’s career stepping-stones while managing front and back and pouring have been gemstones: Toronto’s Canoe, Vancouver’s Cin Cin, Lumière as well as the Moda Hotel’s Uva Wine Bar and Cibo Trattoria duo. Brix spoke with Le Goff in late-August [2010] from Singapore.

Brix: Tell us about your French roots and influences.

SLG: My grandmother, Suzanne, was an amazing cook. When I was a kid, she set up the table for lunch or dinner with an extra place just in case someone will show up. She taught me: always be ready for someone, always make someone feel welcome. That was probably the biggest influence I had growing up in France. We have to make it easy for people so they feel like they came to the right place. It doesn’t matter if it’s casual or high-end. Nothing is a big deal, everything is smooth. For me, that’s important.

Brix: Tell us how you came to work for Jeremy Choo.

SLG: I moved to Singapore with my best friend to start up an import export company. We’d import wine, pigeon, truffles, chocolate, cheese and foie gras from France and distribute it in restaurants in Asia. We were definitely underprepared—no capital—so very fast I had to find a job to sustain our living. I answered an ad in *The Straits Times* for a French restaurant hiring servers. At the time I had never worked in a restaurant in my life. I helped them out with sourcing out suppliers, translating all the documents, importing and so on. Jeremy taught me serving, hospitality, the base of my job. They treated me like a nephew. They got me a work permit, got me an apartment, and were very good to me. I think there are times you really click with people, and they give you more than you ever expected.

Brix: You’ve called Choo your mentor.

SLG: I learned a lot from him. He read large, tasted a lot, travelled extensively to the vineyards. He’s got a great palate. One night he was tasting wine and was able to tell me the vintage and the appellation in Bordeaux. I was like—oh my god, he’s cheating. He and his wife have got a game and they are tricking me. The next night I made sure she was not around. I quizzed him, and he got *everything* right. Amazing for someone born in Singapore who started from scratch, who used to travel to France once a year with his wife, dine at the best restaurants, buy some wine, bring it back.

Brix: Why did you leave Singapore before the end of a year with Choo?

SLG: I got a job in Hong Kong in the import export business. I thought I didn’t go to school to be in the restaurant business. Then I met a woman in Hong Kong. Her

contract was ending and she was moving back to Toronto. My contract was ending and I decided to—you know. Why not? [He laughs.]

Brix: When did your education as a sommelier begin?

SLG: When I arrived in Toronto I needed to find a job. I really enjoyed Vis-à-Vis [Jeremy Choo's restaurant in Singapore] and wanted to get back to that. So I got a job managing Wildfire Grill. After about four months I realized managers are a dime a dozen. But if you have something else you have added value. I always enjoyed wine—Jeremy put the bug in me—tasting it, reading about it and learning. So in 2001 I got my diploma. Most people will be a sommelier, but I like more than just the wine aspect. I like being involved with the business side of it. In restaurants you need to be on the floor to make money, but you have to spend a bit of time in the office to save money. It's very interesting to take a restaurant from the red and put it back into the black, to restructure the organization—staff, purchasing, eliminate waste.

Brix: After several years in Toronto and Vancouver, how is it that you returned to Singapore to open DB Bistro Moderne?

SLG: I had met Brett Traussi their chief operating officer during my time at Lumière and he always kept in touch. One night in Uva around the Vancouver Olympics he goes—we are opening three restaurants in the next six months. London, Singapore and Miami.

I'm like—wow! Singapore. I used to live there. He goes—really? I tell him the story and he goes—would you go back? And I'm like—well, uh, are you hiring? And he goes—yup.

They flew me to New York and it was the two most intense days of my career. Someone puts you in a situation and asks what you would do. Asks about finance, about staff, tries to get a sense of what kind of person you are on the floor, what kind of manager you are. Can you actually read a spreadsheet? Can you understand profit and loss analysis? And it's not just one person, but like six people every day with very different styles. I'd never been put through that before: interview after interview, meeting after meeting in a short period of time.

Brix: What are the current challenges with the operation in Singapore?

SLG: We were supposed to open in June and we hit the ground running. That got delayed for some construction issue and I was sent to help out between managers in Beijing for six weeks. Now I'm looking at opening in early November which means all the ordering of glassware, cutlery, linen, wine, everything. Also, here the economy is booming and there is almost no unemployment. I'm 50% staffed, but I've got a month to find another twenty-three candidates. Putting the team together is always the most challenging. Always. But in an economy where everyone has a job already it's a little trickier. You have to offer something special for people to switch.

Brix: Which is?

SLG: Chef Stephane Istel and the food are very good. It's a very professional environment. We will definitely add value to the people who join us. Also, the company really believes in promoting from within. If you are serious about this career, it's a very good company to join.

Brix: When building a wine list, what is similar and different about Asian, Canadian and French preferences for wine?

SLG: Same, they drink a little bit more red than white even though the weather is warm, and they are price conscious. The young generation drinks wine with more alcohol—Malbec, Shiraz—as they would an aperitif or cocktail. The older clientele drink lighter wines, something that goes with the food. In the shop the decision is usually made by the lady; in a restaurant the man—funny enough. Different, in Singapore there is no wine growing region. Everything is imported. So they are a little bit more open-minded to try new things. When you are in France it's difficult to make the French drink anything but French wine. And it's becoming a little bit the same in Canada where people are very proud of the Okanagan and the Niagara region. Because of the locavore movement they demand those wines first and foremost. Here [in Singapore] we don't have that.

Brix: Where is your favourite place to drink?

SLG: I have two. In Vancouver it's my patio in Yaletown because I've got a view of the mountains and False Creek. In Singapore the weather is always like 30 plus. I just love to take a bottle of wine in a chiller and drink by my apartment pool.

Brix: In France?

SLG: My mom's back yard. That's the best.

Brix: What is the best wine you've consumed in the past year?

SLG: In Beijing on my last evening the Chef and I opened a bottle of 2002 Armand Rousseau Clos de Beze—a red wine from Burgundy. I doubt that I've drunk anything better this year, but I'd better delve into a few more bottles to double check. It was an amazing bottle of wine—really delicate, complex, perfumy and just [here Sebastien kisses his fingertips in that quintessential Gallic gesture].

Brix: Which wines do you keep on hand at home?

SLG: I always have two bottles of Champagne in the fridge—Billecard-Salmon Brut Rosé, Pierre Paillard—something like that.

Brix: Which varietals do you believe merit more attention or less?

SLG: Pinotage from South Africa should be forgotten. I've never had a good one. Since I moved back here, because it's so hot I really like Semillon.

Brix: What is your most memorable wine experience?

SLG: Oh la. That's a tough one. In Vancouver we had a group of wine geeks and once in a while we used to meet. For a couple of those dinners the wine line-up was pretty

spectacular. But I think the single one-up was when I went back home to France for the birth of my nephew. We had a simple wine from the Basque region. It was just the three of us and we were so happy to celebrate that my brother Nicolas had become a father, I an uncle, and my mother Solange a grandmother. I think that's what made it special.

Brix: So places and people add character to wine.

SLG: Yes, for me. That's most important, I think. You can have an average wine just by yourself and that same bottle, if you share it with someone special it becomes [again Sebastien kisses his fingertips].

Author's Update 2014

In July 2011 Sebastien Le Goff ended left Singapore where he had worked to open Daniel Boulud's Bistro Moderne. He returned to Vancouver and joined Cactus Club as Service Coordinator. Once again, he was working with Rob Feenie as he had in the old days at Lumière. Since that time he has been busy overseeing Cactus Club openings in English Bay and Coal Harbour (Vancouver) as well as locations in Abbotsford, Langley, and Edmonton.

In 2012 Le Goff joined previous Cactus Club president Richard Jaffray and executive chef Rob Feenie as a member of BC's Restaurant Hall of Fame. Through this award inductees are honoured for their outstanding professionalism and contribution to the restaurant industry.