

## E&O Hotel Penang pairs Baba Nyonya Food with Italian Wine

*Penang wine lovers rejoice: the landmark Eastern and Oriental Hotel is adding a touch of sparkling Italian culture to its new and zesty Baba Nyonya menu at Java Tree restaurant.*

By **Marco Ferrarese**

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*Pairing baba nyonya food with Italian Franciacorta white sparkling wine at E & O Hotel in Penang (image © Kit Yeng Chan)*

With 135 years of history, the Eastern and Oriental (E&O Hotel) in Penang is the grand dame of the island's accommodation. It is worth knowing that as of late, E&O signature restaurant Java Tree launched a new boutique Italian wine soiree not to miss.

The theme, introduced by Italian wine ambassador Marco Bassa and E&O Hotel's Managing Director Christoph Girsch, is to pair Italian wine with food — specifically, Franciacorta sparkling Italian wine with a menu of delicious Baba Nyonya delicacies.

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This post is an honest review of the E&O Italian wine and Asian food soiree we attended at Java Tree — E&O's charming restaurant.

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After having lived in Malaysia for six years, Italian wine ambassador Marco Bassa thought of replicating what he had learned and done in Melbourne between 2009 and 2010. "In those years, we started bringing real professionalism in the Italian-influenced food and beverage scene," he says. "After [Singapore](#), Malaysia is the second most mature country in Southeast Asia for the wine industry," he continues. "I realized that by bringing good quality wines at affordable prices, the local connoisseurs started knowing and appreciating products they had never had a chance to try before".



*Italian Wine ambassador Marco Bassa and E&O Hotel are shaking up the Baba Nyonya food concept in Penang (image © Kit Yeng Chan)*

Marco Bassa is really selective in his task, only representing wines from canteens all over Italy he knows and deals with personally. "My wines won't have industrial numbers, and will never be seen in a supermarket," he says. "Nothing wrong in being stocked at supermarkets, but I prefer bringing high-quality wines at reasonable prices".

"We are honored that the famous E&O Hotel in Penang added our Franciacorta wines to their menu," says Michele Bozza of canteen La Montina in Monticelli Brusati, Brescia. "It also means that important venues such as E&O Hotel are now looking for wines that very few people around the world know. I believe that today, the added value of the best food & beverage outlets is to have very special wines in their drink menus".

## Penang Nyonya Food and Italian Wine at E&O Hotel: the Menu



*A panoramic of E&O Java Tree Baba Nyonya Penang menu (image © Kit Yeng Chan)*

E&O's Hotel Baba Nyonya Menu at Java Tree normally costs RM135 per person. Even adding four glasses of authentic Italian Franciacorta wine, the cost is still pretty affordable at RM250/pax.

To give you the precise math, if you only wanted to buy a few drinks, you'd spend more — hence the 3-courses and 4 glasses menu are definitely worth considering.

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## Nyonya Starters and Rose' Extra Brut



*Franciacorta Italian Wine and E&O Nyonya starters platter (image © Kit Yeng Chan)*

Eastern and Oriental's new Nyonya food with Italian wine menu pairs a three-course set menu with 4 glasses of different varieties of Franciacorta wine from canteen La Montina in Monticelli Brusati, Brescia.

The evening starts with a cup of Franciacorta Extra Brut, a glass of dry sparkling wine ("metodo classico", equivalent to champagne) that is reserved as an opener, or "aperitivo". The first wine cup served with food is Rose' Extra Brut which, as expected, mixes well with the first Baba Nyonya food platter. Like an Asian "antipasto", it comprises of blackened top hats in pastry shells — filled with jicama, carrot, cuttlefish, shredded egg, and salmon roe — *lobak* made with chicken and shrimp only, and *otak otak* made with local mackerel.

The portion is adequate for a sampler — a choice, I believe, to emphasize and introduce the role of the sparkling Italian wine which should be the real protagonist of your palate for the night.



E&O Penang Nyonya Tiger Prawn and oxtail curries marry extremely well with Franciacorta Italian white sparkling wine (image © Kit Yeng Chan)

The mains are more substantial in size and boast a delicious Pineapple Prawn Curry. The tiger prawns are chunky and hearty, scrumptious and juicy at the right level, thanks to a well-concocted red and white curry, whose light spiciness is a perfect match for the dry Franciacorta Rose it is served with.

Don't underestimate the accompanying second main, the oxtail curry with mustard seed, marinated in vinegar and spices. The meat was prime tender quality, and pardon my fondness for local Penang curries, but the taste was excellent.

The Franciacorta Saten accompanies meat well but, as the oxtail has a tangier, more prominent taste, I frankly preferred pairing the extra brut with my tiger prawns — a more soothing mix of deep-sea freshness and sparkling tastes for the palate. You may think differently, though.

The mains are complemented by a side of *terung tempura*, or eggplant in lime, soy sauce and chili, and *itik tim*, a blend of duck and pickled mustard green that helps warming up your mouth to the meat and fish mains, and of course, the first wash of Franciacorta.



*(image © Kit Yeng Chan)*

Sago gula melaka is the quintessential Nyonya dessert and, of course, E&O Hotel serves it up to close the menu. It comes with its own proper sago zest and a dose of well-balanced coconut milk mixed with palm sugar syrup base. This dessert melts in your mouth and straight into your heart — that’s what any good gula melaka should do, and E & O’s accomplishes it by emphasizing the sugary, mesmerizing qualities of a prime blend of sago pearls, sugar syrup, and coconut milk.

To close off this sensorial Eurasian experience — something that lies at the very origins of old Penang, and something that E & O reproduces to great effect and clever pairings — is a final glass of Franciacorta Rose “Demi Sec” — meaning a dry, medium-sweet wine. It leaves guests with a more pronounced impression of the evening’s Italian wine component, which should be the real foreign protagonist of a well-executed event.

As expected, La Montina’s final offering rinses off your palate, emphasizing the sweetness of the gula melaka, and yet sending you off to your home, or your next drink, by sealing off this Italian-meets-Malaysia dining deal with international gusto.

## **Pairing Italian Wine with Baba Nyonya Food at E & O Hotel Penang: the Verdict**

This new gastronomical and cultural spin on Penang high-end food experiences is definitely boutique and not for everybody. First of all, the price tag (RM250) targets to wine lovers who are not afraid to spend for a special experience.



(image © Kit Yeng Chan)

Second, it's for those who are open-minded enough to try mixing two very different, and yet very classic, food and drinking traditions. To be honest, it was my first time trying Baba Nyonya food paired with wine (and Italian wine, that is) and I came away pleasantly surprised. How could I, an Italian living in Malaysia, have never thought of it before?

The whole evening is well-choreographed in the timeless sala of E & O's Java Tree restaurant and should be particularly indicated to those who appreciate both the tastes of Italy, and one of Penang — and Malaysia's — most authentic culinary experiences. Definitely well-worth coming here with a partner or a dear friend, and totally worth the price.

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*Blogging transparency: Eastern & Oriental sponsored our participation in the wine soiree, but all the opinions expressed in this article are our own. We would not endorse any events, tours or companies we wouldn't use and pay for ourselves, or which don't align with our vision of sustainable, low impact and eco-friendly tourism.*

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