

LEGENDS
SPRING ROLLS

A season's flavours rolled into one

Janice Leung
 foodandwine@scmp.com

One of the most ubiquitous and well-known Chinese dishes, the spring roll has become so common that it's easy to forget that the name refers to a season. Spring rolls are mentioned in relation to the season in Chinese literature, in the poem *Lichun*, about the beginning of spring, by Tang dynasty (618-907) poet Du Fu.

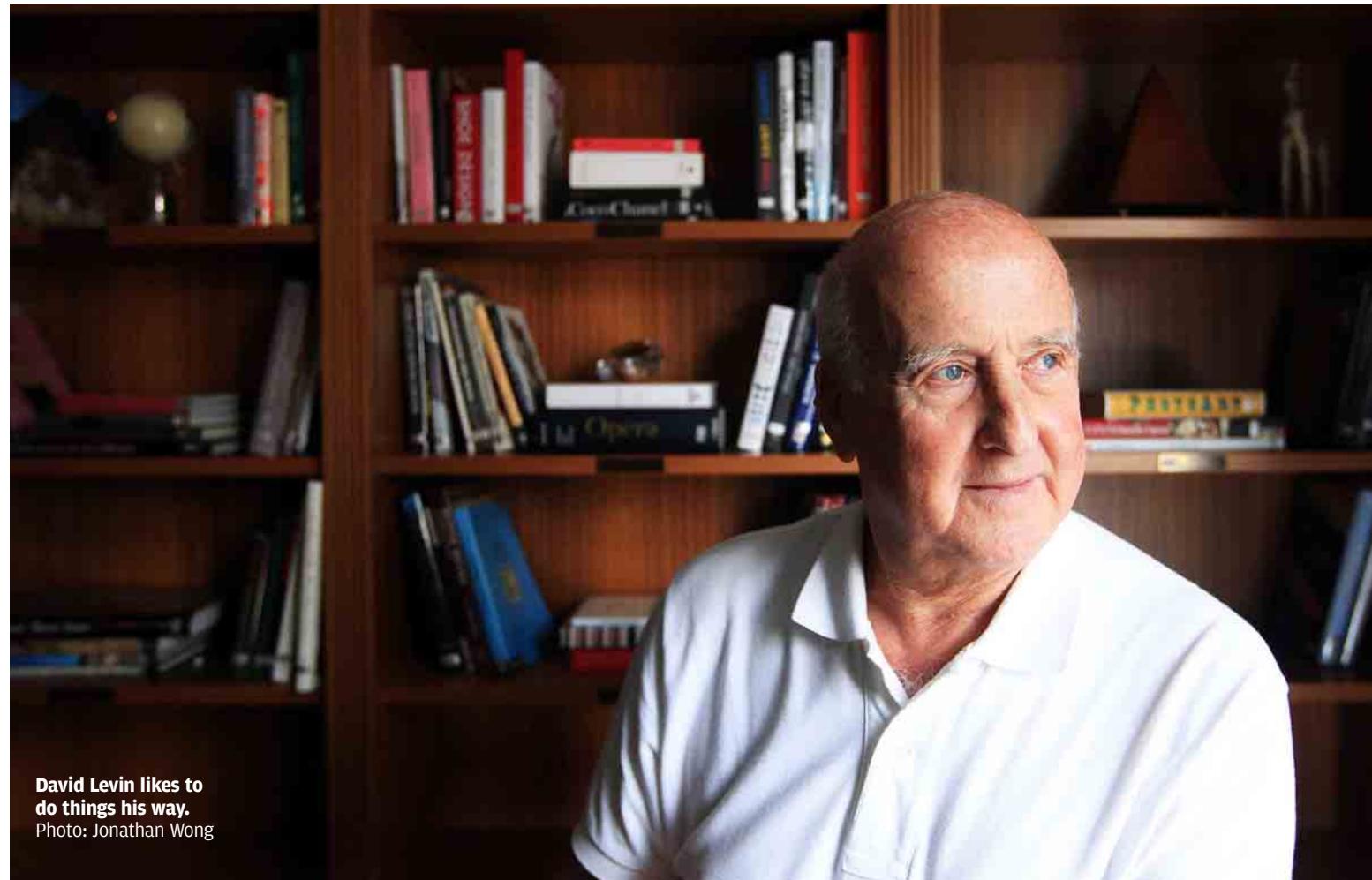
In *The Shoufu*, a collection of stories compiled in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), they are described as an ancient food invented in the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420). It appears that the initial concept was to combine the abundant harvest of spring vegetables into a single dish.

A couple of legends tie spring rolls to Ching Ming Festival, which usually falls in the first week of April. One story is that during the spring and autumn period of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (722BC-AD481), there was a scholar who dared to reject the invitation of a king to be his subject. Accepting the king's offer would have meant the scholar leaving his ailing mother alone at home in the mountains.

In a fit of anger, the king ordered that the mountainside be burned, hoping that the fire would force the scholar and his mother to move out. But the scholar and his mother perished. The king regretted his actions, and in honour of the scholar, declared that no one would be allowed to light any flames that day – so no one could cook.

The day later became known as Ching Ming Festival. People had to think of ways to cook and store food in advance, and came up with the idea of cooking their vegetables and rolling them in pancakes.

The second Ching Ming-related story says that around 1850, during the Qing dynasty's Taiping Rebellion, the country was in such a state of disarray that it became too difficult to prepare elaborate offerings for one's ancestors' graves, so the portability of spring rolls made them the offering of choice.



David Levin likes to do things his way.
 Photo: Jonathan Wong

WINEMAKER PROFILE DAVID LEVIN

Scot's reign of terroir

Vicki Williams
 foodandwine@scmp.com

Hotelier and owner of Levin Wines, David Levin, is a trailblazer. A Scotsman who took Australian winemaking ideas to France, he's not afraid of controversy. In 1965 he bought a pub in England, and before the term gastro pub was known, he introduced a full menu, served coffee in the bar, and promoted magnums of wine. "At that time you would be lucky to get a ham sandwich and drinking half bottles was the norm," he says.

In 1971, he opened London's first small luxury hotel, The Capital Hotel, which was a boutique property ahead of its time. It received a Michelin star for its restaurant (one of only four hotel restaurants to be awarded stars) when the first guide for Britain was published in 1974.

By the early 1980s he owned a number of businesses that required up to 10,000 cases of wine a year so he thought it might be time to make his own. He settled on the Loire Valley in France and began growing grapes in 1985.

This was already enough to ruffle local feathers, but it was only the beginning. "The area was malnourished so I decided what would work best for the land and the environment in general

was to establish an organic, sustainable winery." He was also keen to make wines in a New World way (which included picking and sorting by hand, steel tanks, one tank per field and a consistent wine each year). After visiting several Australian winemaking friends, the idea began to take shape.



The winery is a family business. It was never about being a commercial enterprise

DAVID LEVIN, OWNER, LEVIN WINES

Back in France, architects he approached to build the winery didn't agree with his vision, which included a pitched roof for water collection, among some other environmental considerations.

"They began to annoy me with all their resistance, so the winery was designed in Australia. Every part of it, including the architects and workman to build it, came from Australia. To my knowledge no one has ever done this," he says.

Levin focuses on two grape varieties, sauvignon blanc and gamay. "We don't believe in forcing a vine to grow in surrounds that are not its natural home. We make wine that suits the area," he says.

Production is small at about 10,000 cases annually, with the sauvignon blanc accounting for most of it. About 2,000 cases are for Levin's own use (he has reduced his F&B business interests since those early days) and 8,000 are for sale. "The winery is a family business. It was never about being a commercial enterprise. It makes money, but that was never the motivation," he says.

The natural way of doing things is important to Levin, and this year he will realise a long held desire to use a horse to plough the land. "Using a horse costs over three times the hourly cost of employing a workman to operate a tractor, so it has taken a while for this to be something that was viable."

He says that while most people look to labour-saving machinery, it ultimately reduces the quality of the end product. "Heavy vehicles and machinery press down the soil to such a degree that when it rains, the water simply runs off, leaving dry compacted soil beneath the surface. Any minerals that would be released as a result of moisture are not getting to the roots."

"We are creating an environment which makes a beneficial difference

to the grapes and, as a result, to the wine's quality," he says. The winery's unique growing and production methods are one reason its sauvignon blanc can be enjoyed with some age; for example the 2006 vintage (citrus driven with hints of tropical fruit and subtle herbaceous notes) now coming into its prime.

To ensure that there will be a consistent product year after year, a blend is made by taking a little from each tank (one per field, 19 in total) and adjusting ratios until the desired taste is achieved, which is usually based on the previous year's wine. "Ultimately, each year should taste as good and be of the same quality."

So how do his French winemaking neighbours feel about his methods? "They are not particularly friendly and we will always be the foreigners, even after 28 years. I believe they are furious, more with themselves, that we sell our wines at a higher price, but then we have a better quality product."

"They do have a grudging respect for our methods, though, as they send their children to us to do a stage [work experience], so they recognise that what we do has merit. After all we have won an award for our wines in every competition we have entered," Levin says.

Levin Wines are available from Eminent Wines. Contact Aylmer Tang, regional manager, atang@eminentwines.com