

He is young, rich and eligible but businessman Clinton Ang believes in living the simple life



sandra leong

Wine entrepreneur Clinton Ang is an easy target for detractors. Flip through the pages of any society rag and he pops up at most chi-chi events: the one with the sharp suit, the artfully slicked back quiff, the perfect teeth and the glass of expensive-looking tippie in hand.

The debonair 37-year-old is a fixture in the coterie of Singapore's monied who's who, and is also the managing director and third-generation heir to one of Singapore's most prominent family businesses - wines and spirits distributor Hock Tong Bee. Last year, the company had a turnover of about \$20 million.

There is also the dashing good looks - Cleo magazine once named him an Eligible Bachelor - and the easy charm, particularly when he speaks in his velvety baritone, not unlike that of a glib game show host.

His friend and golf buddy Les Buckley, 48, regional director of Asia-Pacific Breweries, has this to say: "He's intoxicatingly charming and that's natural charm, not false charm."

It is tempting to dismiss Mr Ang as over-privileged, too smooth to be true and someone with an excess of luck and pedigree on his side. So it is surprising to see that the man from the glossy magazine covers lives a pretty humble existence - by Tatler standards anyway.

Home is a 1,000 sq ft one-bedroom apartment in a Guillemard Road condominium, which he has signed a two-year lease for. It is sparsely decorated, save for a colourful montage of photos haphazardly tacked onto a wall next to the dining table.

For the interview, he is dressed casual but chic, in a red polo T-shirt and carefully creased beige trousers.

Feeling bearish about the economy last year, he downsized from a bigger apartment in Laguna Park at Marine Parade and also liquidated about 75 per cent of his investment portfolio - including properties and equities - to a tune of more than \$10 million.

Says the self-proclaimed "maverick": "Sometimes when you have luxuries surrounding you all the time, you forget what is 'yin shui si yuan' (a Chinese saying meaning 'know where you come from'). If you have the opportunity to go back to basics, do so."

Living modestly does not bother him. This is his "second mode" away from the social scene. "I live the full life. You live the high life but you also enjoy the most humble things."

Like "mee sua" from a famous zi char stall down the road. "I can give you the address if you want," he says excitedly.

He adds: "My friends say that Clinton in the media and who Clinton really is are two different people. People think I live the glitzy, glamour life and am the generation that spends all the money."

"In many respects, I enjoy that life. But you would be surprised at how I live every day. My expenses are significantly lower than what people think."

Yes, he gets around in a chauffeur-driven S-Class Mercedes, he says. But his driver is also the company driver who helps with despatch runs and other duties. When he travels for work, he stays in "three-star hotels, not five-, six-star ones".

Not being showy with money helps in business because his clients know the company does not make exorbitant profits, he adds.

His life extends beyond work and high society. Among many things, he is a People Action's Party (PAP) cadre, a badminton coach and player for his Joo Chiat constituency, a secretary with the Siglap South NC2 Neighbourhood Committee



Sparsely decorated, Mr Clinton Ang's one-bedroom apartment in Guillemard Road is a smaller home compared to his previous Laguna Park abode. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Days of wine and roses

and a committee member with the Ministry of Communication, Youth and Sport initiative *Scape.

Last year, he won a Singapore Youth Award in the entrepreneurship category.

Mr Tony Chew, 63, chairman of the Singapore Business Federation who nominated him for the award, describes Mr Ang as an "ambitious, diligent, innovative and astute young man, with a good flair for business".

"Over the past 10 years, I have observed Clinton build a young management team and evolve the company's focus from the existing spirits sector to the fast-growing wine sector, achieving commendable development and growth in his business."

Achievements such as this may help to banish Mr Ang's naysayers, but you get the feeling he still has to regularly fend off criticisms about his silver-spoon upbringing.

He offers all this information about his spending habits readily, and at one point in this interview, leans back and challenges cheekily: "Come on, you've gotta ask me more controversial stuff, man."

You oblige and call him an "ah sia kia" (Hokkien slang for "rich man's son"). He takes no offence and replies resolutely: "If anyone were to call me an 'ah sia kia', it couldn't be further from the truth."

"Obviously my father and grandfather gave me foundation to build on. My grandfather found the land, my father planted the seeds and I'm the labourer to water the land. I'm blessed to have some fruits of labour but it's still a young tree."

And what of his reputation as an eligible bachelor and slick man-about-town?

"I have my fair attention," he says carefully. "That 'area' was never an issue

but my mum always told me I must be serious about whoever I date. All my friends know I'm a one-woman man."

He lets on that he was married for four years, but declines to say more out of respect for his ex-wife.

The "one woman" he is referring to now is trust officer Tina Cheng, 25, whom he has been dating for the past 1½ years. She is "beautiful, intelligent and from a great family background", he says.

Miss Cheng, in turn, says her boyfriend is the sort of man who does not mind shelling her prawns and "loves my family like it's his own". She adds: "He knows how uncomfortable I am with people recognising his charm, so he fends off women himself."

His plans are to marry Miss Cheng next year - though she says she will only say "yes" to a "very special and memorable proposal" - and get started on his family as soon as possible.

"Can you imagine?" he asks. "Next year, I will be 38. We'll probably have our first kid at 40. That's kind of old. Thankfully I still keep myself fit, so not too late."

First million in university

The company he runs dates back to 1938, when his grandfather Ang Soo Seng started a business refashioning abandoned gunnysacks into smaller bags that could then be resold. He eventually made enough to buy a shophouse in Rochor Road, diversifying into food and provisions.

In 1970, the business was passed on to Mr Ang's father Aloysius, a man Mr Ang describes as "a tad early for his time".

A chance meeting with a famous wine producer from Bordeaux inspired the elder Mr Ang to change Hock Tong Bee's focus from wholesale to one involving wines and spirits.

"My father did not want to be a jack of all trades and master of none," he explains. "And he had his way of bringing us into the business. He always had a bot-

tle of wine on the table and talked to us about it."

Mr Ang grew up first in Telok Kurau and then in Bukit Timah, the youngest of three boys and one girl.

At seven, he had his first taste of wine. "Because I was the youngest, my father was always talking to my siblings, not me. Attention-seeker that I was, I took the glass, drank it and fell on my face."

He did two years of primary school at Swiss Cottage Primary but after that, was an Anglo-Chinese School boy through and through. He excelled in badminton, playing for Combined Schools and at national intermediate level.

This was in spite of the fact that he grew up obese - he was 60kg at Primary 4 - and was told by a doctor he would never be a sportsman because he had flat feet.

After junior college, he won a sports scholarship to Arizona State University and represented the United States in national junior tournaments.

It was in the US that as a gutsy college kid, he made his first million.

He started small, first running a business buying and selling used items for students. Then, together with his friend - who, serendipitously, was the son of the owner of White Hall Lane winery in Napa Valley - he began fermenting his own wines in their shared dormitory room.

"The first batch was like poison but after we controlled the environment, we were the most popular dorm room in Arizona State," he recalls with a laugh.

The venture was short-lived. They were shut down by the authorities after a term.

Soon after, he pounced on a golden investment opportunity. With help from his father, he bought 60 condominium units for about US\$16,500 each and began renting them out.

The deal was brokered in 1992. "I held it till 2000, got all the year's rental and sold it for US\$90,000 each. To date, it

was the best investment I have ever made," he says, beaming.

He did not do too badly at school either, earning a double degree in psychology and computer science and later an MBA from the University of Leicester in Britain.

Returning to Singapore after, he gave up top-flight badminton because "being a national athlete was not going to get me anywhere" and entertained the thought of going into fund management after completing national service.

Political ambition in the making?

But duty called. His father had suffered a stroke. His eldest brother was not interested in the business, leaving only his second brother Norman to mind the fort.

"Everyone had told my father that I would be the person who could bring the business to a new level. They said it would be Clinton because every time you tell him 'no', he'll find a way to make you say 'yes'."

Fate had also been written in his Chinese name, which ends with the character "chuan". Given to him by his grandmother, it means "carrying on" in English.

He started out as a salesman, taking over some of the company's most difficult accounts.

"Not many people knew who I was," he says. "It was only when people started taking notice that they realised: 'Eh, this one is boss' son'."

His father gave him a blank cheque to buy whatever car he wanted. He returned it and with his savings, bought a used Honda Civic. Five years later, he traded up for a Hyundai Sonata, then a Kia Magentis, then finally his Mercedes today.

The elder Mr Ang died of cancer in 2003, at age 65. Says his son: "My greatest regret was not being able to convince my father to retire earlier and when he wanted to, he was diagnosed with cancer. Even now, I am still sore with myself, especially when I see my mum thinking of him often."

His brother Norman is still a non-executive director with the company.

And how the business has grown from its early beginnings. Now housed in a seven-storey building in Geylang, it distributes labels such as Pol Roger Champagne from France, Antinori from Italy and Saint Clair from New Zealand to restaurants, airlines and supermarkets and also does warehousing and logistics.

He points out: "Many people think family businesses are very insular and non-progressive, but these businesses employ over 50 per cent of the workforce."

He plans to list the company in 2013, take up an executive chairman position and then look for other "community service or national service" projects to do.

You sense some political ambition in the making. After all, as a grassroots and business leader, he already has the resume for it.

He agrees, albeit in a roundabout way. He says he has enough money to retire and provide for his future family. "As long as I don't spend \$50,000 a day, not a problem."

Then he adds: "Singapore is at the stage where we need renewal. I never think about whether I have any political ambitions but if one day my country requires me to go beyond self, I would answer the call. But it is not my choice."

All in good time, maybe. After all, party whites will probably look good on him. sandral@sph.com.sg

the monday interview with Clinton Ang

my life so far

'Pol Roger Brut NV. Because in best of times, we feel even happier drinking it and in tough times, it makes us feel better. As Sir Winston Churchill said: "In victory I deserve it, in defeat I need it"'

On his favourite choice of tippie



'If you think about it objectively, dating two girls is possible but then if you think about having two mothers-in-law, that might be a problem'

What he tells his mother, retiree Madam Christine Soon (left), in jest, when she tells him to be serious about women



Mr Ang at age six (above) and with girlfriend Tina Cheng (left), whom he hopes to marry next year.



The youngest of three boys and one girl, Mr Clinton Ang is seen above (standing, far right) with his siblings, their spouses, parents (both seated, far right) and grandmother. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CLINTON ANG

'All of the above'

When asked if he indulged in parties and boozing at college in the United States