

# ACADEMIC:

## Asians need own wine lingo

### Gao Ceng

**J**eannie Choo Lee, the first ethnic Asian master of wine, describes herself as a Burgundy Pinot Noir, "initially not very easy to understand and seeming kind of light and soft, but with strength, fundamental values and integrity behind that softness."

Lee was the first wine expert to systematically describe wine using terms more understandable to Asians, such as dried mushroom, jujube and star anise.

Born in Seoul, Lee moved to the United States at an early age and studied at Harvard. Since 1994 she has been living in Hong Kong where she is a leading wine writer, critic and educator and mother of four daughters.

The 45-year-old wine master is known in China for two prize-winning books, "Asian Palate" (2009), the first book systematically pairing wine with Asian food, and "Mastering Wine for the Asian Palate" (2011), which gave prominence to Asia's own wine vocabulary. Both are written in English and translated into Chinese.

Lee says she's more like a scholar, serious and rigorous.

"I try to make wine easy to understand without making it too simple," she said in Shanghai last month in an interview with Shanghai Daily.

Besides wine, Lee has a passion for food, which inspired her first book. She holds a Certificat de Cuisine from Le Cordon Bleu. She's also a Master Sake Sommelier, awarded by Japan's Sake Service Institute.

It's much harder for a young-looking Asian woman to be a recognized wine master, says Lee, adding that there's a lot of pressure. Some European vineyard owners have mistakenly thought she was not experienced enough to judge their wines.

"When they, especially Europeans, see me, their first impression is that I am not from a wine-making family. My history with wine is not so long, especially with fine old wines," says Lee.

Motherhood also took time away from wine study. In 2003, when she was seriously studying for her MW, she had four children under six years old. She attributes her success to her determination and her husband's support.

"I can fail but never quit. Quit means you didn't even try hard," says Lee.

Being a woman has its advantages. "In a lot of wine tastings and dinners, I usually sit next to the most important person because I am a woman," says Lee.

### Broadening wine lexicon

Familiar terms such as cedar, plum, mint and tobacco are not the only words Lee uses to describe Cabernet Sauvignon. It can also be described with flavors familiar to Asians, such as dried mushroom, dried jujube, green pepper and green tea leaf. Raspberry, cherry and violets are traditionally used to describe Pinot Noir, but waxberry, medlar and Thai jasmine flower can also be used.

The fragrance of Semillon can be described as citrus, fresh herbs, preserved apricot, star fruit, bamboo and white sesame.

Describing wine flavors in Asian terms for a fast-growing wine market sets Lee apart from many wine experts. "Asians are becoming very important consumers and producers. We must expand our vocabulary



**Jeannie Choo Lee is the first wine expert to systematically describe wine using terms more understandable to Asians.**

## Q & A

### Q: How do you get into wine?

A: When I studied at Oxford as an exchange student ... fine wine is always served at a formal dinner. When I touched fine wine for the first time, I was surprised wine could have so many flavors, giving the quite-plain British food flavor, just like seasoning.

### Q: How do you stay objective? Do you ever award 100 points?

A: When judging a wine, it's not whether I like it or not but whether this wine possess all the characters that make a great wine. Yes (100), but rarely. It was a 1952 Chateau Lafleur, a wine that you can't describe because it's an experience, trying to explain the feeling like falling in first love.

### Q: What's your wine philosophy?

A: It's just wine. Don't make such a big deal out of it. Wine can bring you joy and happiness but truly in life, there're many things more important than wine. Wine is a luxury. Luxury only comes when everything else around you, family, career, health are happy.

to have our (Asian) perspectives," she says.

"I have never tasted blackcurrant and raspberry in my life. How can I get these aromas from wine?" asks wine lover Faye Gu. "Many Shanghai wine classes still use classical Western wine vocabulary, which challenges entry-level wine lovers like me."

"Lee's vocabulary makes my tasting much easier," Gu adds.

Andrea Zhu, Lee's Chinese publisher, cites readers as saying that Asian terminology makes wine more accessible.

"Lee helps popularize wine culture here to reach more people," says Lu Yang, wine director at Shangri-La Group, also the top sommelier in China.

Lee's innovative, culture-specific terminology has its skeptics among wine experts, who say it lacks precision and is adaptation for adaptation's sake.

"Maybe the Europeans don't understand. But it's just the same as our (Asians) not knowing what a currant is. Asian ingredients are not supposed to replace the Western, I just expand the flavor descriptions to make them acceptable," Lee explains.

Comparing the aroma of dried jujube to that of blueberry and mint to green bell pepper is based on research and experience, she says. Lee began with 600 Asian ingredients and narrowed them down to suit particular wines and explain terms that otherwise might be inexplicable.

Lee sees similarities in the aromas of truffle and bonito (tuna) flakes, lychee and longan, violet and jasmine tea leaf, mineral content and wakame seaweed.

Not all Western wine terms can be adapted for Asian, Lee says. She cites "brioche" to describe the baked aroma of old Champagne and mature white Burgundy.

She is now talking to the Wine and Spirit Education Trust to rewrite their educational materials, incorporating the Asia-specific vocabulary she uses. "They (Westerners) can use theirs and we can use ours."

Lee says she is confident that her vocabulary will eventually become part of a universal wine language because more Asian ingredients are used by chefs worldwide.

### No single answer

Before Lee wrote it, there was no guide on pairing wine with Asian food.

"Asian Palate" doesn't just make recommendations (Pinot Noir with Peking duck), but also explores how the components of flavor in food and wine react to and complement each other.

"There's no one simple answer in pairing

### Cabernet Sauvignon — Regional Expression

#### Bordeaux (France)

**Asian:** Dried Chinese mushroom  
**Western:** Cedar



#### Tuscany (Italy)

**Asian:** Chinese red tea leaves  
**Western:** Dark cherry



#### California (US)

**Asian:** Dried jujube  
**Western:** Black olive



#### Australia

**Asian:** Dried jujube  
**Western:** Plum



#### Chile

**Asian:** Chinese green pepper  
**Western:** Mint



#### South Africa

**Asian:** Chinese green tea leaves  
**Western:** Tobacco



because everyone's palate is different. I just analyze and encourage readers to find answers by themselves," says Lee.

For example, tannins in wine accentuate the spiciness in food, so why should spicy food lovers serve a less tannic wine?

Many people, especially a TV audience, want a simple, direct and quick answer, not a complicated one, she says. But "when I have to give a very simple answer, I'm very dissatisfied."

Lee has studied 10 Asian food cities, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, Tokyo, Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Mumbai. In each city she spent a month in kitchens, talking with chefs and exploring and rating the importance of various flavors and ingredients — sweet, sour, bitter, umami, oil and fat. Each is ranked from 1 to 5.

She then looks at the flavors and structure of wine, such as the tannins, acidity and body, and sees how the food and a wine react with each other.

"Before Lee, few people analyzed the relationship between umami flavor with wine," says publisher Zhu.

"Umami brings out earthy, bitter or savory notes in wine. It is both delicate and savory, thus, wines need equal delicacy and subtlety with emphasis on wine's silky tannin texture and mouthfeel," Lee writes.

### Wine changes in China

Lee's upcoming third book, "The Growth and History of Fine Wine," is a business and marketing book about the fine wine industry in China, including Hong Kong, over 30 years.

Wine is becoming a new social currency, which replaces abalone and bird's nest to show respect, Lee says.

It also changes the way Chinese do business. "It used to be about drinking baijiu (Chinese distilled spirit) and gan bei (toasting) but this has changed," Lee says. "Compared with opening a Moutai, a bottle of Lafite shows that people are more sophisticated. And the whole dining experience slows down, it's calmer due to the low alcohol content in wine."

The Chinese wine palate remains unchanged, however, and the preference is still for medium-full bodied Cabernet, she observes. One reason is that local wine producers occupy 75 percent of domestic market and they use and market Cabernet grapes. The Bordeaux region is also considered high-status. Another reason is that Chinese like strong-tasting beverages.