

For more than sixty years, the two-letter initials issued by the venerable Institute of Masters of Wine remain synonym of ultimate success in wine knowledge, particularly in Asia where education is highly revered

On the crest of a wave

by *Maria Pranzo*

The Institute of Masters of Wine traces its origins to a collaboration between the Vintners' Company, one of the Twelve Great City of London Livery Companies, which received its first Charter in 1363, and the Wine and Spirit Association. After the Second World War, both these organizations decided to improve education standards in the British wine trade and certify the most talented people who had raised awareness of wine culture. Hence, in 1953, an examination was held in which, of the 21 candidates, only six passed. In 1955 those six became the founders of the most prestigious institute in the world. From 1953 to today, 366 students have passed the exams to become Masters of Wine. There are currently 312 Masters of Wine living in 24 different countries (193 of whom live in the UK) and, through their activities, promoting wine culture around the world. Although the exam had always been open to women too, it was not until 1970 that the first female MW graduated: Sarah Morphew Stephen. These days there are many female MWs, and in Asia, they are in the majority; in 2008 Jeannie Cho Lee and Debra Meiburg in Hong Kong, and Lisa Perrotti-Brown in Singapore became members of the institute and ambassadors of wine culture in Asia. Spirito DiVino Asia met five of them to discuss their thoughts of the Institutes enjoying worldwide fame and respect.



Jeannie Cho Lee

One of the most enchanting stars in the wine world is unquestionably Jeannie Cho Lee, award-winning author, television host, wine critic, judge and educator and Sake Sommelier. Jeannie's pioneering book, *Asian Palate*, exploring Asian food and wine pairings in ten Asian culinary capitals, won numerous awards and her second book, *Mastering Wine for the Asian Palate*, received international praise. Jeannie is a Professor of Wine at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and consults for Singapore Airlines and the Goldin Group. She became famous in Italy, too, when she purchased the most valuable lot in the auction of Alba white truffles in 2010 (936 grams at a mere 105,000 euro). Jeannie also received a major award from Vinitaly in 2009 and was ranked 25th in Decanter's 2013 Power List of the most influential people in wine. "The Institute's greatest merit", explains Jeannie "is that it has introduced standards in the wine world; at a time of wine's increasing global popularity, it was vital to qualify and certify people with the skills to best relate wine culture". We asked Jeannie why she thought that the MWs in Asia are mainly women. "It takes patience and sacrifice", she confessed "and many men are not ready to take on the real commitment entailed by the Institute's study programme and risk failing the exams ... perhaps we ladies are more adventurous!"





Debra Meiburg

A Hong Kong resident for 25 years, Debra Meiburg is a celebrated wine educator who is pleasing palates across Asia with her fresh take on the world of wine. Meiburg's approach is always ironic and fun yet professional. She told us why she decided to become an ambassador of the Institute: "I studied for the Master of Wine title because of my passion for wine. I loved having permission to learn about wine at a deep level and didn't give a thought to what the title might mean to my career afterwards. My goal was the learning; it was my reward". The Institute is widely recognized and highly esteemed in Asia, and Meiburg tells us why: "The MW title is seen as the pinnacle of success in terms of wine knowledge and in Asia, where knowledge is revered, there is great respect for the accomplishment. In historic China, only highly trained scholars called Mandarins could attain social mobility and secure high-powered political roles. Thus top-level scholastic achievements are highly valued. The Institute of Masters of Wine stands as the highest attainment of wine knowledge. Already there are more than 20 students in Asia hoping to place those special "MW" initials after their names."



James Cluer

James Cluer currently resides in Napa, but he lived in Hong Kong for 20 years, from 1978 to 1997, and he passed the Institute's exam together with his colleagues Debra Meiburg, Jeannie Cho Lee and Lisa Perrotti-Brown. Consultant, educator and organizer of interesting wine tours, he is also General Manager of two wineries, a judge in major competitions and a journalist. Cluer is an eclectic who has managed to exploit the energy of Hong Kong and he started working in the wine world at a very tender age, as he related to Spirito diVino: "I did my first WSET exams in Hong Kong at 18, and worked for an importer there for my first job, and then sold wine to many of the importers for years after that. I love fast decision-making, hard-working people, a party atmosphere, great food and wine culture. HK is a great city for wine lovers, and I started my website www.winejobsHongKong.com because I wanted to help the trade and job seekers come together". Cluer said, in his opinion, the Institute has become so popular in Asia: "It is mainly thanks to Debra and Jeannie, and Lisa in Singapore", and adding: "They drive the awareness of the IMW in Asia and are all very dynamic people. I respect them a lot!"



Penny Richards

Penny Richards became the Executive Director of the Institute of Masters of Wine on 1 May 2013. Richards has always worked as a journalist and spent several years abroad as BBC's Asia-Pacific Bureau Editor, during which she was in charge of a 60-person team that covered BBC news on half the world's population. Prior to joining the Institute, Penny was the Director of Global Advocacy and Research for VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) based in London. "The wine world is a new adventure for me", Richards says enthusiastically: "It's been such a fantastic year to join the Institute, with our Symposium in Italy, and our 60th birthday celebrations in London. But the next few years will be equally exciting, working on building our Membership in Asia and beyond, and organising trips for Masters of Wine to further their understanding of the Asian markets. There's never been a better time to be involved with the MWs!" All the Institute's activities are carried out with the aim of promoting the school, Richards explained: "With their activities, our members contribute towards the Institute's good standing; they are our ambassadors and we are very happy about the way our Institute is represented in Asia".

Lisa Perrotti Brown

Born and raised in Maine of the USA, Perrotti-Brown came to the wine world by chance, working in a friend's wine bar in London. Her passion for wine grew rapidly and she soon attained her diploma at the WSET. In 2002, Lisa moved to Tokyo, where she worked for one of Japan's leading fine wine importers whilst working part-time as a wine educator for Tokyo Academie du Vin. The keen traveller has used her base in Japan to explore Asia in her quest to discover the various cultures and seek out development opportunities for the wine market. Perrotti-Brown now lives in Singapore where she received the MW title in September 2008. "Singapore is a 'mature' market by Asia's standards and a 'maturing' market in the context of the world", the MW continues: "I'm really hoping that we're able to nurture even more local wine experts to become MWs and I'm keeping my fingers crossed right now for a very promising Singaporean who sat the exam this year, so watch this space!" The active journalist and writer has just finished writing a book "Taste Like a Wine Critic", which will probably be published end of the year. The book aims to explain what "wine quality" is and puts the power of wine choice in the hands of the consumer. "After it is published I'm hoping to offer lectures in select cities on the topic of understanding wine quality to complement the book", Perrotti-Brown told Spirito diVino Asia.



The Institute announced its first female graduate in 1970,
now they are having more and more