

## Heard on the grapevine: A Lesson in Wine by Jeannie Cho Lee

The Hong Kong-based Asian Master of Wine explains how the perception of wine and winemaking is changing in Asia, and the importance of using the right glass when drinking a particular variety of vino.

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Born in South Korea and having grown up in the US, Jeannie Cho Lee settled down in Hong Kong in 1994 and has since established herself as an acclaimed author, wine critic, judge, educator and certified Master of Wine, the first ethnic Asian to ever achieve this accreditation. She explains how the perception of wine and winemaking is changing in Asia, and the importance of using the right glass when drinking a particular variety of vino.

Singapore Tatler: What are some of the trends in wine drinking today?

Jeannie Cho Lee: It really depends on the market – the trend in New York is very different from in Paris or Hong Kong. In Asia, we are seeing a trend away from Bordeaux and towards other styles such as the more delicate wines from Burgundy, as well as other countries that make wonderful wine – such as Spain, Italy, the US, Chile and Argentina.

Singapore Tatler: How would you characterise a good wine? Any examples of outstanding wines that you've sampled recently?

Jeannie Cho Lee: Good wine really depends on style. For example, a great Burgundy red is as much about its aromatics and silky texture as it is about intensity and length, while a good Bordeaux red is more about its structure – including the tannins, acid and flavour balance. The aromatics of a wine can often be closed in its youth, so not as much emphasis is placed on a young Bordeaux nose as it is for a Burgundy.

I am lucky to have experienced some outstanding wines. A wine I enjoyed recently was the 1997 Sassicaia, which has amazing depth and youthful vigour despite being 16 years old! It is still just shy of its peak, but the wine is supple, balanced and intense, with a very long finish.



Singapore Tatler: How far does price correspond to the quality of wine?

Jeannie Cho Lee: It can be an indicator, but in many instances, such as the best sweet wines of Sauternes or the best dry white Chenin Blancs from Loire Valley, the wines are undervalued for what they are. The success and price is often created by demand from the market, so if you look at regions such as Bordeaux, where international demand is high, value is harder to find, whereas wines from Portugal, which are less in demand, are relatively good value given their quality.

Singapore Tatler: In 2008, you became the first Asian person to attain the title of Master of Wine. Why do you think it took so long to happen?

Jeannie Cho Lee: I know that many Asians have attempted the exam in the past, especially from Japan. However, I think the exam itself is challenging for those who have grown up under the traditional Chinese, Japanese or Korean education systems, which are based on rote learning. The exam involves numerous essays, critical thinking and analyses, and requires people to have a very strong understanding of winemaking, viticulture and the global business of wine. All of this takes time, training, background and experience.

As a region, Asia is relatively new to wine, so it took us a while to excel in an examination that even the Europeans, or those who grew up with wine, routinely fail.



Singapore Tatler: It's been said that a woman's palate is sharper than a man's. Do you agree?

Jeannie Cho Lee: I do often see women who can identify flavours better than men, but often it is the men who remember the details better – the name of the wine, producer, vintage. Even though women may have sharper palates, they tend not to take in the details as well, which means they are not building their palate memory in a way that they can remember how to associate those flavours with specific wines. This is changing though. When I see more and more women making the effort and the time to remember wines and associate them with what they tasted, I see the solid foundation of a great wine lover or professional.

Singapore Tatler: How does the Asian palate differ from the Western palate?

Jeannie Cho Lee: We have different eating habits and different diets. I realise we are making very grand, sweeping statements about “the Asian Palate” versus “the Western Palate”. In general in Asia, we prefer greater intensity of flavours – spicy, sweet, sour, salty can occur all at once in one plate. We also appreciate texture and our basic sense of salt is enhanced by the flavours of umami, which exists in fermented flavours.

If you look at how much and how widely we use soy sauce and its derivatives, we prefer greater depth than just saltiness. We are spoiled by the number of dishes we eat during one meal, as Asians tend to have more than one meat, potato or vegetable dish all night long.



Singapore Tatler: How receptive are Asians toward Asia-made wines?

Jeannie Cho Lee: Many Asians can be negative about Asia-made wines, and that is because they remember that one awful bottle they had long ago which gave them a negative first impression. This is quickly changing and the wines now made in China, India, Thailand and of course Japan, which is the most established, are very good and improve every year.

Singapore Tatler: Alcohol flush reaction is best known as a condition commonly experienced by people of Asian descent. Do you ever suffer from it and what advice do you have to nullify its effects?

Jeannie Cho Lee: Fortunately, I do not suffer from this. I am not sure what can be done except to drink more water in between glasses to mitigate some of the effects.



Singapore Tatler: You recently conducted the Lucaris Master of Wine Seminar in Singapore. How important is it to have the right glass when drinking a particular wine?

Jeannie Cho Lee: I think it is very important, more so than having the right dish/plate for a meal. It is not purely aesthetic but practical, and it can enhance or detract from the best the wine has to offer. I always use good glassware when drinking even basic, everyday wine. Why not get the most for your money regardless of the wine's pricepoint?

Singapore Tatler: Red, white, rose, brandy, champagne. Are we missing anything else?

Jeannie Cho Lee: Sweet wine, sparkling wines and fortified wines such as Sherry and Port! These wines are relatively undervalued for their quality at the moment.