



All the Right Notes

Her title is Master of Wine, and for Jeannie Cho Lee '90 the elite designation gives her an influential role in the worlds of wine and food.

By Maida Pineda '96

Back when [Jeannie Cho Lee](#) '90 was still a student at Smith, she went to Oxford to study for her junior year. During breaks and holidays, she and a friend would spend their days traveling around France and Spain, skimping on lodgings, but, at Lee's insistence, splurging on great meals and good wine. "I don't mind sleeping anywhere," Lee says, "but I have to have good food and a glass of wine."

Fifteen years later, those two loves have blossomed into a lucrative career that has garnered Lee international acclaim. She is the first Asian to receive the rare designation of Master of Wine, a rigorous course of study very few successfully complete involving blind tasting; written exams on viticulture, vinification, and aspects of the wine trade; and a 10,000-word dissertation. By making it through, Cho joins an elite group of fewer than 300 wine masters in the world—only a quarter of whom are women.



For Lee, the distinction has given her the opportunity to combine several of her passions—writing, food, wine, and travel—and play a key role in influencing the burgeoning Asian wine market. Her unique pairings of wine and traditional Asian cuisine are outlined in her internationally acclaimed, and exquisitely photographed, book, [Asian Palate](#), which many consider to be the first comprehensive book on Asian food and wine. In it, Lee provides an overview of the food and beverage histories of ten major cities in Asia, suggesting wines for everything from snack foods to formal dinners, all with local traditions and flavors in mind. Earlier this year, Lee accepted the prestigious Gourmand Award for Best Food and Wine Pairing Book in the World.

Michael Hill-Smith, a colleague and fellow wine consultant, says Lee has the potential to break down barriers and be a leader in the industry. "She can taste 200 wines a day and still be very accurate," he says. "She's going to be highly influential not just in Asia but worldwide. And it is well-deserved. She's very capable and she works hard at it."

Indeed, the life of a Master of Wine isn't always all Bordeaux and pinot noir. Lee spends a lot of her time on the road, lecturing and judging wine shows all over the world. She also writes regularly for leading wine magazines, including *Decanter*, *Wine Spectator*, and *La Revue du Vin de France*, and serves as one of three wine consultants to Singapore Airlines, a job that requires her to sample close to a thousand bottles to determine the best wines, ports, and champagnes to serve to travelers.

To keep the subtle nuances of each bottle of wine she tastes straight in her mind, Lee has developed a habit of keeping a little brown journal in which she records her impressions. "Wine is complicated," she says. "If you like a bottle, you have to remember the producer, the vintage, where it's from, along with the details of how it tasted. There are so many things to remember."

In the past fifteen years, Lee has filled more than fifty notebooks, which ultimately served as the foundation for the Website she launched in the spring, AsianPalate.com. The site allows visitors to search a library of nearly 7,000 reviews of wines, sign up to get advice about wine selection, and join special events. By creating the site, Lee says she hopes to begin a dialogue with readers about Asian food and wine. “Wine should not be relegated to only Western restaurants,” she says.

Though it’s clear that Lee loves what she does, being a wine expert was not an ambition of hers growing up. Rather, Lee, who moved to the US from Korea with her family when she was 7, dreamed of becoming a writer—much to the dismay of her mother, who told her only child, “Honey, that’s a really nice hobby, but you’re not going to make a living being a writer. The things you enjoy and like aren’t going to come from a writer’s salary.”

At Smith, Lee heeded her mother’s advice and opted for a double major in political science and sociology, two fields that she figured would make her more employable—and her parents happy.

It was at Oxford during her junior year that Lee had what she considers her great awakening to the world of fine wines. Oxford, she notes, is one of the largest buyers of Bordeaux, and at formal events everyone talks about the wine. Lee could barely keep up, so, in order to follow the conversations, she went out and purchased a book on wines. She became hooked almost immediately. “I knew this was something that would always intrigue me,” she says. “I loved food and the kind of flavors you get from wine are as complex as food.”

Following her graduation from Smith, Lee went straight to the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and then took a job on the management team at a top Korean company. All the while, though, she kept thinking back to her childhood dream of becoming a writer. After marrying in 1994, she decided to give up her job, move to Hong Kong with her Korean-American husband, and begin work on a book about the enslavement of Korean women by the Japanese Army during World War II. But, after completing eight chapters and numerous drafts, she shelved the project when her husband’s job required them to move to Malaysia in 1996.

A year later, she was appointed editor of a new weekend magazine published by the *Sun* newspaper. Turns out, writing features on wine was one part of the job. To increase her knowledge—and credibility—on the topic, she achieved certification from the Wines and Spirits Education Trust (WSET), a distance-learning course out of the UK. In 1998, she left her job at the *Sun* and moved to Hong Kong to start a family. When an opportunity to enroll in a PhD program in international relations at Hong Kong University came up several years later, she considered the steady salary and regular schedule of an academic career but ultimately decided to pursue what had become a true passion. Intrigued by the idea that no Asian had ever completed the Master of Wine Program, she enrolled at the Institute of Masters of Wine in London partly for the challenge. The three-year program includes a rigorous eight-day live-in seminar, marathon written exams on everything from taste to the business of wine, and a dissertation. Lee, who had two young daughters when she began, is quick to admit that the program was tough. Complicating matters, after being accepted, she found out that she was pregnant again, this time with twins. “The smell of wine made me throw up,” she says. “The whole time, I was suffering.” She requested a year off, and a faculty mentor who had initially been supportive warned, “You’re not going to make it. You’re not going to pass.”

It took her several tries over the course of a few years, but in 2008 she finally passed her exams and handed in her dissertation, titled *The Potential of Hong Kong as a Wine Hub for Greater China*.

Earning the title of Asia’s first Master of Wine came at the perfect time. In the past five years, the market for fine wine has been declining in both the United States and Europe, but it has exploded in Asia. Slowly, Hong

Kong is surpassing London as the world's second-largest wine market. One thing that hasn't been so quick to change, though, is the stereotype of the wine expert as an older Western man in a tweed suit. When Lee dines out with her husband and friends, for example, they task her with ordering the wine, but when the sommelier comes to the table, he ignores her and presents the bottle to one of the men. "They're used to the man making the decision," she says. "I think it's funny."

With the release of *Asian Palate*, Lee is changing people's perceptions, not only of wine experts but also of Asia's culture of food and wine. In the book, she never offers a simplistic formula for matching a tempura with a chardonnay or an Indian curry with a Shiraz. Rather, she presents a sociological and historical analysis of how Asians eat, noting that meals often consist of up to six different dishes. Lee cleverly details how each bite is different, with the flavors of the condiments, sauces, and rice adding distinct elements to the overall dining experience. To provide such a nuanced perspective, Lee relied on insights gleaned from her travels along with her own memories of a childhood spent eating only traditional Korean food at home. "My mother has never cooked a Western meal," she says.

Now that her professional profile is growing, Lee, who has four daughters, admits that following her heart and never letting go of long-held dreams were keys to her success. "You have to be honest with who you are, with what drives you, with what interests you," she says. "I want to be known at the end of the day as someone who did my own thing."

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