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Tracing Asia's wine map

Jeannie Cho Lee MW turns a new page in the relationship between food, wine and Asian culture

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Appetising coffee table books detailing the delights of Asian food are not exactly a rare sight, but Jeannie Cho Lee's new book, *Asian Palate*, is something else. It maps the impact of wine on the food culture of Asia and the developing relationship between them.



Asian Palate, Jeannie Cho Lee's new book, maps the impact of wine on the food culture of Asia and the developing relationship between them.

Nothing too world-shaking there, you might think, but what raises it above the standard level is that the author, Korean-born Jeannie Cho Lee, is the first Asian to leap the barrier from being a dedicated wine lover to a Master of Wine. And *Asian Palate* breaks away from any residual feelings we might have that wine really belongs with Western food, and shows that it's as much at home with Asian cuisines as Asians want it to be.

She has chosen 10 cities to exemplify the incredible variety that is Asian cuisine: Bangkok, Beijing, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Mumbai, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, Taipei and Tokyo. In the chapters devoted to each she describes the historical background and the development of their food and beverage cultures then suggests, as starting points for discovery, the range of wines that correspond to the taste, cultural heritage and preference of each.

Of wine in Asia generally, she has said: "Collectively, the Asian market is going to be incredibly important. And as Asians, our tastes and our preferences will be ours from our own cultures, climates and conditions. They won't be laid down by experts saying, 'You should drink this with that!'" And that, I think, is where the story begins.

Her own wine experience began when, as a political science student at Smith College Massachusetts, she went on an exchange programme to Oxford and travelled around Europe. For the first time she saw neat rows of vines climbing hillsides in France and Germany, tasted the wines and became fascinated by the whole process.

"There were so many different kinds from so many different regions and there was so much I didn't know," she said. "I didn't want to be intimidated by my lack of knowledge about wine, so I began to read all I could."



Jeannie Cho Lee, the first Asian Master of Wine.

Later, with her degree from Smith and a Master's in Public Policy from Harvard, she pursued a career in business journalism, and continued to read, taste and learn. She received a Cordon Bleu Certificat de Cuisine and the Wine and Spirits Education Trust diploma, but wine was still little more than an absorbing hobby.

"I had no plans to make it a career," she said. "I didn't see much opportunity in Asia at that time."

Even so, she was a prolific and much sought-after wine writer, contributing regularly to Wine Spectator, Decanter and The Asset, and being much in demand as a speaker, educator and competition judge. She was also appointed by Singapore Airlines as a wine consultant.

It was Jancis Robinson, at that time one of the new wave of high profile wine commentators, who recommended her to raise her sights still further as a Master of Wine.

As a writer, Jancis Robinson had recently become the first MW who was not directly involved in the wine trade. She has said that Jeannie was the Asian wine writer who most impressed her with her dedication, and the Master of Wine examination, gruelling as it is and with such a dauntingly low pass ratio, would be good for her and also good for Asia if she were to succeed.

By now married with two children (there would be four by the time she took the exam), Jeannie would be looking to at least two years of intensive self-study supplemented by compulsory annual seminars in England, then, once she had passed the theoretical and practical exams, a 10,000-word dissertation. But the letters MW after her name would confirm her not simply as an "expert" - she was acknowledged as that already - but among those who had achieved the highest level of practical and theoretical knowledge in the global wine community.

The Institute of Masters of Wine (IMW) was founded in London in 1955 by the six successful candidates (six out of 21, and the rate of attrition continues). By the end of 2009, after 56 years and many applicants, there were still only 279 Masters of Wine from 22 countries, 75 of them women.

"With four small children, work and an active social life, I found the hardest part of the course was finding the time to study," Jeannie said at the Grand Hyatt Erawan on the Bangkok leg of her 10-city journey to launch the book.

"The theory was the most demanding part as it covered so much material in depth; and it was also difficult not living near a classic wine region where one could have access to winemakers and ask them questions."

She found the practical component, tasting wines blindfolded, much easier. "You need a good palate and a memory bank so you can taste the wines and file them away in your mind," she explained. "It's partly a gift, but you can work on it and improve with training. It's the same as with a professional athlete: how much is success talent, how much constant practice?"

"I've found that tasting some wines has an emotional effect on me. Every once in a while I taste a wine and I feel tears in my eyes because it's so beautiful! And however many interesting wines I have to taste - I've sometimes had to taste 100 in a morning - I can still be moved."

But in 2006, a month away from travelling to England to take her exam, two of her children both had accidents.

"I had to inform the institute and back out of the exam," she said. "Perhaps this was God telling me I was being selfish by pursuing something that I clearly had no time for in my life! But I went on and took the exam the following year. I knew that if I didn't I'd be sure to regret it one day.

"The family helped in every way possible. My mother came to stay with the children whenever I had to go to England. My husband always told me that in his eyes I was and had always been a Master of Wine, and my children wrote me encouraging notes and cards to keep me going.

"I was surrounded by so much love and support, that I felt mentally able to focus my energy on doing my best."

The entitlement to add the letters MW after her name finally came in 2008. In Nov2009, Asian Palate was published by Asset Books of Hong Kong.

In her introduction to the book she writes, "It is time to take a new approach to our expectations of 'a perfect pairing' in the Asian cuisine context." To which I would simply add: "Now read on..."