

Harvard Woman Defies Skeptics as Wine Master

By Le-Min Lim - Apr 28, 2010



A bottle of Chateau Lafite Rothschild 2005.

Source: Sotheby's via Bloomberg



Jeannie Cho Lee, the first Asian Master of

Wine. Source: Asian Palate via Bloomberg

[Jeannie Cho Lee](#) says she wonders sometimes if her life as a certified wine expert wouldn't be easier if she were a gray-haired man with heavy glasses.

Looking that way would better fit the industry expectation of a [Master of Wine](#) as a tweed-wearing European gentleman and she wouldn't get skeptical looks from vineyard owners doubtful that she knows enough to critique their wines, she says. Overcoming those first impressions is a challenge the Korean-born Lee says she faces as the only Asian among 279 Master of Wines and one of 75 women with that rare qualification. She likens herself to "a blond, Swedish man" trying to rate the best dim sum in Hong Kong, and imagines he would face the same incredulity from locals who grew up in the culture.

"You have to prove you can play the same game but do it even better," says Lee, 41, whose jet-black hair drapes her shoulders like a shawl. "It's never easy."

Lee is used to being the odd one out. She recalls migrating to Long Island from Seoul as an 8-year-old and being taunted at grade school while she struggled to understand the teacher. Yet, from fifth grade through [Smith College](#), she was near the top of her class, and would graduate with a Master's in public policy from Harvard University at 23. As a high-school student in downtown New York in the 1980s, she twice witnessed street violence and says the experience "toughened" her.

The only child of supermarket-owning parents who wanted a big family and whose son died at the age of one, Lee says she felt obliged to obey their wishes to marry a Korean and pursue a stable job as an academic.

Wine School

It was her marriage, at 25, to investment banker and Korean migrant [Joseph Lee](#), whom she met at a New York wine school, that freed her to pursue her love of food and writing. "He said, 'I will always provide you with the stability to do whatever you want to do; that's my role,'" she says.

Lee followed Joseph to Hong Kong for his job with UBS AG in 1994, and was a wine-and-food reporter for the Far Eastern Economic Review.

From 1999, Joseph Lee was a managing director at Goldman Sachs Asia LLC and retired recently, she says. When a chance came in 2001 to either study for a Ph.D. at the Hong



Jeannie Cho Lee, the first and only Asian Master of Wine. Source: Asian Palate via Bloomberg

Kong University or become a Master of Wine, she chose the latter.

“I’m used to taking exams, but this was different,” says Lee, recalling the four days of “non-stop writing” for the Master of Wine examination that caused her fingers to blister and her arm to cramp. She earned the title in 2008.

“It’s unprofessional to get drunk,” says Lee. “In the wine profession, no one has seen me drunk. Period. I just don’t go there. As a woman, I feel that sense of responsibility.”

Four Daughters

Now, between daughters aged 13, 11 and twin eight-year-olds and running a startup wine consulting firm in an open office shared with a stock brokerage in Hong Kong, Lee says she plans to start a database in May that lets subscribers view her ratings on 10,000 wines, from their taste to investment value.

As Hong Kong overtakes London to become the world’s second- biggest wine hub, the city will offer more wine-related services, says Lee. Hong Kong scrapped wine duties in February 2008 and held 14 wine auctions last year worth almost HK\$500 million (\$64 million). She says Hong Kong qualifies less as a generic wine hub than one for bottles worth \$100 or more.

Noting the sold-out wine sales and record [prices](#) at Hong Kong auctions held by companies such as [Sotheby’s](#), Lee says the “crazy bidding” was fuelled by new buyers who either didn’t know the bottles’ worth or felt they were cheap relative to the millions they were paying for art, she says.

Price Point

At [Sotheby’s](#) April 3 auction in Hong Kong, for example, a 12-bottle lot of Chateau Latour 1982 in original wooden casing fetched HK\$338,800 or \$43,649; about two weeks later, New York- based [Tribeca Wine Merchants Ltd.](#) ran an advertisement in the city’s newspaper offering the same for \$2,250 a bottle.

Only well-known wines like Petrus, Latour and Lafite would retain their value or be resold for higher prices, she says. Lee says wine should be bought for pleasure, not investment --and prices for lesser-known wines won’t sustain current levels.

“I have not known anyone who made their fortune in the wine business; don’t expect to be the first,” says Lee. “If your goal is to make money, do it in another industry.”

Those who insist on wine investment should buy bottles they enjoy and that age elegantly, she says.

Lee says white wines from Germany and the Loire Valley as examples of low-priced,

underrated bottles that could age beautifully for “50, 60 years.” She also likes Pinot Noirs from Oregon, and high-grade reds from Australia and California.

When unwinding with her family, Lee says she prefers a good bottle of red wine that’s 10 years or older, such as a 1985 or 1986 Bordeaux or a 1988 Burgundy. The most enthralling change in a bottle of fine red wine that’s 10 years or older is its texture, which turns “silky from velvety with age.”

“Then it becomes a real pleasure to drink,” she says.

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