

Marry Asian food with respectful wines, expert says

(Agencies)

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A waiter serves a glass of red wine from Spain during a tasting session at Vinexpo Asia-Pacific, the International Wine and Spirits Exhibition for the Asia-Pacific region, in Hong Kong May 28, 2008.[Agencies]

SINGAPORE - If you've ever puzzled over the perfect wine for Thai tom yum soup or south Indian fish curry, a book by Asia's only master of wine takes the guess-work out of pairing an essentially Western drink with Oriental food.

Jeannie Cho Lee, a wine writer, judge and lecturer based in Hong Kong, said the sheer diversity of Asian food, and the fact that one meal can have a myriad of flavors, made it extremely challenging to find matching wines.

But with wine playing a bigger role in Asian dining, she said the two key elements to look for were acidity and versatility.

"Because of the way we eat, which is more communal and has a huge variety of flavors, any wine must be able to go with this range, but also not to overpower it," Lee told Reuters.

"It is also very important for wine to be refreshing, with enough acidity to stand up to our spicy, fried food."

Lee's book, the glossy, coffee-table offering "Asian Palate" launched last week, highlights the increasingly prominent role of wine in a part of the world that only really started embracing the drink in the last decade.

Divided according to the cuisines of 10 cities from Hong Kong to Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur and Mumbai, the book distills what has been a labor of love for Lee, the only Asian to hold the "Master of Wine" title from the Institute of Masters of Wine, dedicated to promoting the wine trade.

South Korean-born Lee's interest in wine began at Oxford University in Britain, where she spent a year as an exchange student. "I was exposed to some very good Bordeaux, and during that time, wine became for me like food, something really rooted in history and culture," she said.

At graduate school, Lee said she seriously toyed with the idea of going into the food and beverage industry, but after internships at several restaurants, she realized commercial kitchens exhausted her.

"All this led me to combine my interest in wine with my other love in life, writing, and more than 10 years later, I am still writing about wine," she said.

IMPORTANCE OF WINE TO GROW IN ASIA

Lee has specialized in food and wine writing since 1996, contributing to a variety of publications, including Wine Spectator, and holding lectures on the subject and judging at international wine fairs and competitions.

As for Asia, Lee predicted the importance of wine at the dinner table would only increase as more Asians incorporate Western elements into their lifestyles and have more disposable income to spend on luxuries.

"Wine is related to lifestyle and its role will only continue to progress at a really steep incline as our dining culture evolves," she said.

"We used to eat for necessity, but now more people are appreciating the flavors of the food and lingering over these wonderful flavors, something which the right wine can enhance."

And finding the right wine can be difficult, Lee said, since Asian food, unlike some European counterparts, is complete on its own, and needs no liquid condiment.

"In European food, the wine and the food unite to create a whole that is better than the various parts, but in Asian food, combinations of this sort are rare," she explained.

"It's a balancing act that is based on respect."