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The Asian Palate: An Interview with Jeannie Cho Lee

Ken Yeh: As you demonstrate in your book, different places in Asia have very diverse types of cuisine and there are so many flavours - often within the same meal! So how do you go about defining the Asian Palate?

Jeannie Cho Lee: There is no concrete definition for the Asian Palate. It is a dialogue, a journey - it is yet to be defined. The American or European palate is better understood, especially with respect to wine – the role of fine wine merchants based in London helped to bring that dialogue into place years ago. In Asia there has been no dialogue so far. I don't consider myself to have answers to all the questions, but I have started asking them. I think it's the next generation that will find the answers.

In the introduction to your book you mention that your mother is an excellent cook. What is your favourite childhood dish? And what wine would you pair with it?

It's a Korean street food called tteokbokki (or topokki), a real comfort food. It is tubes of rice cakes fried with chili paste, garlic, sugar and onions. I used to eat it and cry it was so spicy. I would avoid anything too tannic or oaky as that would prolong the spicy burn by about 22 to 45 seconds – I've calculated! So, I would choose a wine with very strong fruity flavours, maybe a nice pinot noir from New Zealand for something more refreshing. That being said, there are some people who enjoy prolonging the spicy flavour of the food. If this is so I would recommend a New World wine – something complex like the Rayas Chateauneuf du Pape in your sale.

I can remember a time when my family would enjoy dinner with a bottle of cognac. In your experience of travelling around Asia, have you noticed any growing trends in the way that people pair drinks with their food?

It's true that many people, still today, enjoy spirits with their food. But trends are changing slowly. I think it is because of the high alcohol content that people are used to that there is a greater preference for the burn and full bodied texture of mature reds. White wine is generally underrated here because it is too light and fresh for people's palates. I have also noticed that in cultures where people are accustomed to drinking bitter tea, they are more inclined to choose very tannic red wines.

And what about Champagne?

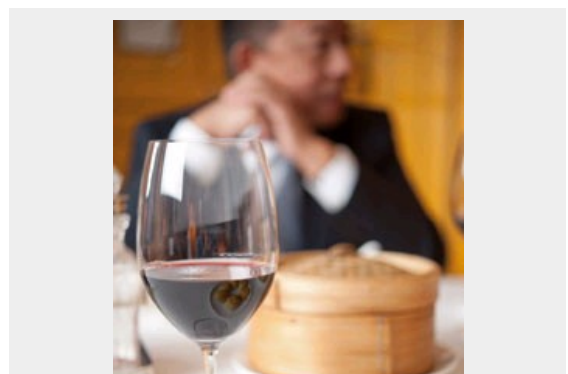
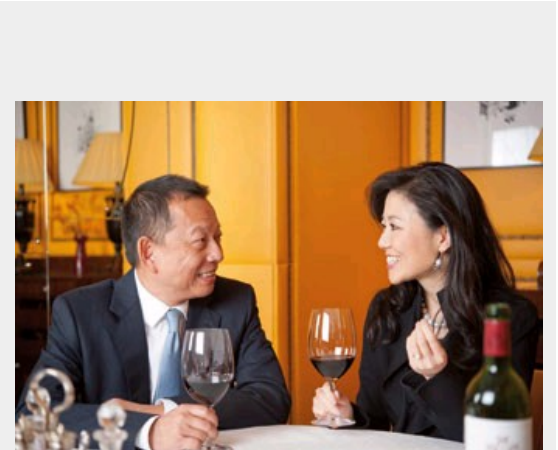
Champagne definitely carries a luxury image. It is burst open when hosting special events and parties and so is often used in a celebratory context. But I think more and more people are realising that it is an essential way to start a meal and that it is certainly part of a wider range of wines that should be considered by any connoisseur.

We have a few double magnums and imperials in the sale. What are the advantages of large format bottles?

Large formats have yet to receive the recognition they deserve in Asia. Not everyone realizes that the ageing process is different because of the smaller air to liquid ratio in large format bottles. As a result they are younger and fresher – this adds to their quality and value since they age longer.

Personally I am a fan of Burgundy but in my experience it seems that many Asians have a preference for Bordeaux wines. Do you think people are starting to recognise the qualities of a good Burgundy?

Burgundy is a more difficult region to understand because of the numerous appellations and a large number of small producers. The region is significantly



smaller than Bordeaux so the wines are less available and supply is tiny for the top wines. Recently there have been a lot more Burgundy wine tastings in Asia – it has always been very popular in Japan. Food there goes much better with Burgundy. I have a feeling it is partly linked to their ageing population. Older wine enthusiasts are more likely to want a lighter more gentle wine. Burgundies are very elegant and nuanced.



We have an exquisite collection of Château d'Yquem wines in our forthcoming auction. What are your thoughts on sweet wines?

Château d'Yquem is unparalleled in quality – there are few Sauternes that can match it. In terms of pairing it with food, my response would differ depending on the age of the wine. The characteristics of a young Y'quem are fresh, sweet and light, like a mango sago. After 15 years of maturation it becomes more refined, and more of a food wine. I would pair the wine from your sale with soy-based dishes or even a delicate seafood dish. Many Shanghainese dishes would go very well. Lion's head meatballs for example would be a perfect combination.

So now that your book is out, would you care to share with us what you are working on next?

I have just launched my newest project - the Asian Palate website. It contains hundreds of articles and commentaries on food and wines, along with all my unpublished tasting notes from recent years. I just returned from Bordeaux after tasting over 400 wines from the 2009 vintage and these are all up and available already on the website. This is a preview site and the full launch of the website will be in May 2010 during Vinexpo.

Visit Jeannie's site: AsianPalate.com. For more tips on pairing wine and food, buy Jeannie Cho Lee's book, *ASIAN PALATE*, available from TheAsset.com, Amazon.com and local book retailers.

Jeannie's wine suggestions:

Lots 50 & 154 Chateau Latour, Vintage 1959

Lots 101-103 Chateau Haut-Brion, Vintage 1989

Lots 189 & 190 Chateau d'Yquem, Vintages 1918 & 1919

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