

Pairing wine with Asian Food? Yes, it can be done

Don't know which wine to order with bulgogi or crab in black bean sauce? No worries, Jeannie Cho Lee has your back. And your wine list.



The dress goes with the wine. As does a nice green curry chicken.

(22 October, 2012 – Gavin Nazareth) Any old guzzler can trot out a bottle of industrial-grade red to go with a plate of cheese and crackers and have a decent chance of impressing the dinner guests.

But what happens when you need to pair a wine with the robust flavors of mutton biryani or the delicate zing of shrimp tempura?

That's when you need a real wine master around. Or at least her advice.

In Asia, that often means consulting Jeannie Cho Lee, one of the regions' leading authorities on wine.

After becoming the first Asian in the 54-year history of the Institute of Masters of Wine in London to pass the organization's notoriously difficult four-day exam, Lee became part of an elite group of 297 worldwide Masters of Wine.

Then she set off to introduce the world to the fine art of matching Asian cuisine with fine wines.

Bold flavours and more than a hint of irreverence

While it's easy to pretend to nod knowingly at notes of honeysuckle, bergamot and truffles, traditional wine flavors and aromas don't often resonate with the reference points of those who grew up in Asia.

That began to change when Lee published a pair of guides to matching Asian cuisine with wine.

Published in 2009, her "Asian Palate" paired wines with Asian cuisines from 10 of the region's culinary capitals.

Her 2011 "Mastering Wine for the Asian Palate" expanded the theme.

With these two books, Lee introduced a new vocabulary for wine using Asian-based ingredients to describe wine flavors while proving that, yes, wine does have a place at the Asian table.

"I took into consideration the Asian palate and perspective, which meant trying to find a reference point to different grape varieties, describing what they taste like, in a way relevant to someone living in Asia, where we have different foods, vegetables and ingredients," says Lee.

"In my mind, wine plays two roles in Asian culture. It really does slow down the tempo of how fast we eat. And we do eat way too fast."

In addition, the traditional Asian meal is different from the Western one, she says, "where you order fish, I order chicken, while someone else orders beef. In Asia, the meal is usually communal, so with a bottle of wine diners share the same flavors. There is a kind of communal spirit about it, so I believe it fits into our culture."



When it comes to pairing wine with Asia's intense flavours, Lee's advice is to stop being anxious about which bottle is perfect for which dish.

Don't get hung up on proper pairings

Because the vibrant bouquet of aromas and flavors associated with Asian food can be intimidating for novices, Lee's advice on pairing begins with the idea that diners should stop being anxious about which wine is perfect for this dish or that.

"So what if it doesn't go with a certain dish?" she says. "Get over it. Just don't drink it when you are having that one very spicy dish. There will be so many other things on the table that it will go with.

"Learn how to take a break between bites. If you take a bite of a particular food you know is going to clash with the wine, follow it with a sip of water or tea to cleanse your palate.

"You don't have to be so hung up about the perfect encounter or the perfect pairing, because like with any thing in life, perfection is an illusion."

Tips for wine pairing

Below Lee offers wine pairings for culinary favourites from around Asia.

China



Before picking a wine to go with Peking duck, consider the flavour of the sauce.

- Peking duck: Pinot noir from Burgundy to match a mild plum sauce. For a very sweet sauce, a pinot noir from New Zealand would pair better.
- Dim sum: Dry Alsace Riesling, especially a German trocken Riesling.

- Drunken shrimp: White Burgundy or a white Italian Friulano.
- Crab in black bean sauce: Southern Rhône Red or a Grenache blend.

India



If biryani's on the menu, an Italian red will cut through the spices.

- Mutton biryani: Mature Italian Nebbiolo with good acidity to cut through the spices. A Barbera would pair well, too.
- Pork vindaloo: This needs sharp acidity to cut through the spices but is also fruity. A chilled German pinot noir from a ripe vintage in Pfalz or Baden.
- Vegetarian thali: For mild flavors, a zesty sauvignon blanc from Loire Valley like a Sancerre. For stronger flavors, a New Zealand sauvignon blanc would pair well.

Japan

- Shrimp tempura with dip: Burgundy red such as a Volnay.
- Tuna Toro: Grand Cru chablis.
- Kaiseki: Vintage Champagne from 1985 or 1982

Korea

- Galbi ribs: A good Merlot. Either from Washington state or from Pomerol.

- Bulgogi: A medium-bodied red, Grenache-based. Either a Châteauneuf-du-Pape from southern Rhone, or one from southern Australia.

Malaysia

- Beef rendang: Australian shiraz or a spicier one from northern Rhone like an Hermitage.
- Prawn sambal: A chilled rosé or a sparkling rosé from southern France, possibly Provence.

Singapore

- Hainanese chicken rice: Depends on the spice levels. Something white and fruity like a full-bodied pinot gris from Alsace, or a full-bodied Grüner Veltliner from Austria.
- Black pepper crab: Chilled Grenache-based wine, light-bodied, or a top-quality Beaujolais Cru.

Thailand



Lee advises diners to pair Thai green curry with a Pinot Noir.

- Fresh spring rolls with shrimp and fish sauce dip: A dry/trocken Riesling.
- Glass noodles with seafood: Either an Albariño or Rueda Verdejo from Spain.
- Green mango salad: Gewürztraminer from Alsace.

- Green curry chicken: For a mild curry, pinot noir from Burgundy or Germany. For a spicy one, match with a pinot noir from the New World.
- Stir-fried beef with basil: Hermitage syrah.
- Mango and sticky rice: Either a Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA) from Austria, or a Tokaji from Hungary. If the mango is not too sweet, then a sauternes would work.
- Pork satay with peanut sauce: A California or Australian cabernet blend.
- Som tam: Full-bodied Gewürztraminer or a Muscat.

Though the above dishes are easily matched, Lee is quick to add that one has to also know when there is no role for wine at the Asian table.

"There are times when you don't need wine and that's partly because we have created our heritage in how we eat and what we eat, in such a way that either the meal or the dish is complete on its own."

"So you really have to know where the limits are, like with noodle soups. Why force wine into it, there is no room for it. With a perfect noodle soup from Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan, Korea, basically you are trying to combine a hot broth with an 18 degree Celcius or cooler wine.

"Our soup broths are so flavorful and wine does nothing for it, it distracts. I would say have a glass before and maybe after the soup."