

Wine Master Jeannie Cho Lee Discusses Asia's Burgeoning Wine Scene

Color Magazine - Lifestyle

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Asians everywhere are drinking wine like never before. Overseas, the flow of wine is a sure sign that burgeoning wealth and a growing middle class are kicking in on consumption. Hong Kong auctioned more fine wine than the entire United States in the first quarter of 2010. "The surge started post 2007, when media coverage raved about the then newly released 2005 vintage," according to Beatrice Wong of Wine World Ltd., a Hong Kong based wine company. With 400 producers, China already ranks as the world's sixth largest, ahead of Chile and South Africa. The wines are improving. Trade barriers are slowly disappearing. Foreign vintners are starting to invest in Asia. Asian vintners are investing abroad. The cash, skill, and will to fight even harsh climates are there; at one vineyard they apparently remove each individual vine and store them inside every winter. Wine with Peking Duck, Teriyaki Chicken, Korean Kalbi or Indian Curry? Yes, thank you.

The buying power of Asian Americans will increase from \$509 billion in 2008, to \$752 billion in 2013, a 47 percent growth rate, according to "The Multicultural Economy 2008" study by the Selig Center. Fuelling the trend, more and more winemakers and wine entrepreneurs are Asian born. Lee's

Discount Liquor in Las Vegas, Nevada, run by Korean immigrant Mr. Lee is about to build the United State's largest chain with 15 stores in total and an annual turnover of \$100 million. On the East Coast, PJ wines in New York City, a very popular wine retail and wholesale company, is Korean owned, founded in 1991 by wine connoisseur, Peter Yi. "An increased number of Asians are attending wine tastings," said Lee Miyamura, the Hawaiian-born Japanese American winemaker at Meridian Vineyards in Paso Robles, California.

Regarded as one of Asia's preeminent authorities on wine, Jeannie Cho Lee was the first ethnic Asian to be awarded the coveted Master of Wine (MW) title, one of only 279 people in the world to have attained one of the industry's highest standards of professional knowledge. Jeannie Cho Lee was born in Seoul, Korea, went to high school in NYC, and currently lives in Hong Kong. A graduate of Smith College and Harvard University, she started becoming interested in wine during her junior year at Oxford University, where wine with dinner is the norm. Her book *Asian Palate* (2009) is a tour de force. People living in the ten Asian capital cities she features, including Hong Kong, Beijing, and Mumbai, now know what wine to order. However, her efforts also benefit those who care for Asian clout, cuisine and culture.

Jeannie Cho Lee's take on wine is novel, refreshing and distinctly Asian. All her wine reviews are very visual and often include graphics: "I am not trying to dumb it down because I respect Asian people's palate, but I am trying to find the right way to present it." According to Lee, "Wine should help people slow down everyday flavors," and to succeed with that aim, "wine with Asian food needs to be versatile." Hence, she favors restrained wine styles from cool climates like Burgundy, Loire, Alsace, and Oregon, white grape varieties such as gruner veltliner, as well as sparkling wine. asianpalate.com, Cho Lee's multilingual website, went online in April 2010 and aims to "democratize the appreciation of wine in Asia."

At present, virtually no Asian wine gets imported to the United States. However, Jeannie Cho Lee has wine recommendations for visitors to Asia: "Dragon Seal or Chang Yu in China, Grace winery in Japan, the sparkling wine Omarkayan from Chateau Indage in India, Siam winery in Thailand," but warned, "don't expect to get the full dollar value just yet."

Beyond being Asian, Cho Lee is also an attractive, young woman stereotypically fighting a crowd of more average looking, old white men. Hence, the question, are there particular challenges to being an Asian woman in the wine industry? "The Master of Wine (MW) changes the perception. If people don't know my MW background, say, in Europe, they look at me and say; what could she possibly know? She is Asian. She is young. Once a year on average I am in a restaurant and meet a sommelier that talks down at me. For instance, at a famous restaurant in Hong Kong, a waiter came, opened, and poured a wine. I immediately told him

it was corked, but he refused to smell it. Instead, he asked me abruptly to get another wine if I did not like it," she explained enthusiastically. Nothing seems to deter this MW.

The Asian wine scene is flourishing. Hong Kong leads, mainland China is coming, Asian Americans are getting on board, and my advice is, whether you are Asian or not, let Jeannie Cho Lee be your Master of Wine.



Trond's Picks

While I hope to present some homegrown Asian wines in the future, here are some wines that are guaranteed to match Asian cuisine.

Biokult Gruner Veltliner Austria (2008, \$16, 88/100)

Grown from The Michlits family's organic grapes in lower Austria, aged for seven months in stainless steel, certified by Bio-Austria, Austria's largest organic association, this exquisite wine is fresh, lightly perfumed, with a fruity-spicy aroma reminiscent of freshly ground black peppercorn. Lemony citrus notes, straw yellow color, slight touch of minerals, firm, with elegant grapefruit aromas. A versatile wine with Asian cuisine, scallops or shrimp or as an aperitif. Simply fresh, pure, and clean.

Vinos de Mar y Sol Syrah Central Coast (2004, \$13, 87/100)

This Californian wine from Hispanic vintner Violeta Barroso has a riveting and rough but not unpleasant bouquet, surprisingly powerful aromas of blackberry and cherry and is great with Mexican, Creole, or Asian food, provided there is meat involved. Regrettably, I cannot seem to find other vintages and I wonder what has happened to the production. Ms. Barroso is herself the daughter of Mexican vineyard laborers and won accolades for her Merlot as well when she entered the wine scene in the early 2000s. I have had no success reaching out to her. Vinosmarysol.com is down...

Domaine Lavigne Saumur Champagne Cabernet Franc Loire Valley (2008, \$19, 90/100)

This absolutely splendid wine was imported to the United States by Cynthia Hurley, but obviously first created by caring folks near the town of Saumur in France's Loire Valley before it found its way to my dinner table. Distinct crowsberry notes and what might be more easily recognized as raspberry accents were accompanied by unusual softness for a Loire Valley red wine. However, the wine needs some contrasting food, as the earthy, mineral strong flavor might overpower an American palate. This wonderfully dark red wine would stand out with any ethnic food, grilled meats, lamb in particular, and was fantastic with matured French Brie cheese.

The Asian Wine Scene

Aficionado of Asian food? Getting ready for your next trip to Asia? Supporting ethnic vintners? Explore the Asian wine scene domestically and abroad with these links to wineries, merchants and associations who cater to the Asian palate. Stay tuned for more stories and links in another issue.

Asian Palate (website) www.asianpalate.com

Chang Yu winery (China) www.changyu.com.cn

Dragon Seal (China) www.dragonseal.com

Grace Vineyards (China) www.grace-vineyard.com

Grace Winery (Japan) www.grace-wine.co.jp

Lee's Discount Liquor (Las Vegas) leedisliquor.com

Meridian Vineyards (California) www.meridianvineyards.com

PJ Wines (NYC) www.pjwine.com

Siam winery (Thailand) www.siamwinery.com

Wine World Ltd. (Hong Kong) www.wineworld.com.hk