

MASTER OF WINE

Crave meets Jeannie Cho Lee, the first Asian Master of Wine. A dedicated epicure, Lee uncorks her wisdom on a challenging topic for the wine connoisseur: how does one pair wine with Asian cuisine?

Text by Jason Spotts



Asian cuisine has a diversity of flavour unmatched around the world – no wonder pairing food with wine in this region challenges both sommeliers and gourmets.

In France and other wine-producing countries, certain wines partner certain dishes. In Asia, where we like to eat communally from a selection of dishes, it can be difficult making a selection from the wine list.

Even experts armed with the British Institute of Wine's Master of Wine certificate (considered by the industry as the highest standard in professional knowledge – only 279 people worldwide have earned the title) might struggle to choose the right bottle.

So it will come as some relief to know that – at last – there is now a Master of Wine who hails from Asia. Step forward Korean wine connoisseur Jeannie Cho Lee.

As the author of *Asian Palate*, Lee is the first expert to provide a detailed study on pairing wine with Asian food.

So, considering the popularity of wine in Asia, why has coverage on this issue previously been so sparse?

"Very few people in the world fully understand both the culture of Asian cuisine and the world of wine," says Lee. "Wine is incredibly complex and diverse – so is Asian cuisine. The challenge is finding where they meet philosophically without forcing one on the other, and without being patronising to both worlds."

According to Lee, finding common ground begins with asking the right questions. In *Asian Palate*, Lee believes she has begun to ask and answer some of these. But she's quick to remind us that the book and its accompanying website (www.asianpalate.com) aim to promote intelligent discussion as well as education.

"The real answers may not emerge in my lifetime," she says. "They come with time by engaging people in a meaningful dialogue. These are questions that can't be answered in one book."

Despite the complexity of the issue, surely Lee has one overriding characteristic she looks for in a wine when she is eating Asian food?

"Versatility," she says. "Your wine should complement the diverse, communal nature of Asian meals without dominating. Ideally, it should be refreshing – to balance intense Asian flavours. It's like squeezing lime on pad thai, which lifts the entire dish. Your wine should lift the meal, not drag it down."

Lee was a keen epicure in her native Seoul before she travelled the world learning about wine. Her knowledge of both stands her in good stead, but her experiences in Europe swayed her towards concentrating on wine.

"With food and wine, learning is all about a first connection," she says. "When you

discover new appreciation for a certain flavour, it's a hedonistic, sensual experience and you want to learn more.

"I studied in Europe and was exposed to better wine than I was used to drinking back home. In Korea or the US, the wine I drank was like canned food in comparison. It was eye-opening to say the least."

A thirst for knowledge soon took hold.

"I read books," says Lee. "I asked questions. I went to dinner parties to learn more. When I came back to the US, I found a refined wine scene in California. I began to follow the progress of wineries and my love grew from there."

So how do we begin to learn about wine? Lee recommends that if you take a wine course, sign up with a friend to promote further discussion. It is about developing a personal curiosity and that will then grow effortlessly.

"If you want to learn about anything at all, find that one thing that interests you and build upon it. Identify which wines you like and ask for more. Ask 'who are my favourite producers? What's their philosophy? their style?'"

"Then, bring that knowledge back to why you like it. Once you figure out why you have a passion for something, it's easy to expand your knowledge because that love is based on you. It becomes personal, and you branch out into a whole new world."



FREEZE Imaging

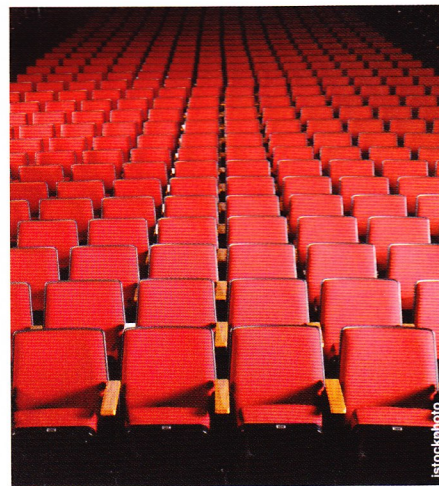
You visited many places while writing *Asian Palate*. What are your favourite dishes from these countries?

In Japan, it is definitely *kaiseki*. It's poetic and elevated to an art form. My friend hates it and says it's stuffy. Well, you can say the same about opera. It's a different type of art form. In Korea, it's a spicy soft tofu stew. In Singapore or Malaysia, it's *nyonya* – a combination of Malay/Indonesian spices and ingredients made with Chinese cooking techniques.



You are also a wine consultant for Singapore Airlines. What are the primary challenges of wine pairing at 30,000 feet?

The challenges are numerous. First is dehydration. Your mouth is dry and you feel thirsty. It means that tannins are more pronounced up there. Also, the cabin is colder than what we'd consider room temperature. This can suppress the fruit in your wine and it will be less giving. So we try to pick wines that give more expression.



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If you weren't a food and wine journalist or educator, what you would be?

A professor teaching political science theory, which is my background. I'd love to be a diplomat, travelling the world making foreign policy, or dedicating myself to a charitable cause. Or I'd be a pilot and fly. I'd love to be a full-time novelist – I've two unfinished novels in the works. Maybe I'll finish them when I turn 70. I also want to help revive live theatre.

What are some of the biggest myths about Asian cuisine and wine?

1. Only white wine goes with spicy food. You'd naturally think you'd want something cooling, right? But we're forgetting that chili lovers don't care. They want to prolong the heat. The role of wine is not to stop heat. A mildly tannic red, like a merlot, can make the heat linger just enough.



Imagine

2. Gewurztraminer (a grape variety) is the first choice for Chinese food. Wrong. It's too strong, too loud, and too dominant. Let's take a beautiful steamed fish Cantonese-style, for example. Gewurztraminer will obliterate anything delicate like that and fight the flavour. It's like putting a crazy design from Versace on Katherine Hepburn.



3. All Chinese people mix wine with Coke or Sprite. People always ask me about this. If you know even a tiny bit about wine, you won't do that. People are starting to really learn about wine in China and Hong Kong. Things have changed a lot compared with 10 years ago when the world would dump all its bad wine on China. When a country's interest and consumption in wine emerges, you will always have experiments. The same thing happened with the US when wine coolers (sweetened drinks mixed with wine) were once more popular than wine.



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