

the drinks business

CHO LEE TIPS GERMAN WINE FOR ASIAN SUCCESS

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Jeannie Cho Lee MW has picked out two main shifts within Germany's wine industry that she predicts could have an important positive effect on the country's fortunes, especially in Asia.



Jeannie Cho Lee MW

Speaking to *the drinks business* before an event in London that forms part of a global tour to promote German wine pairings with a range of Asian cuisines, Cho Lee identified a “real movement” among German producers to focus their exports on “food friendly” styles.

“We’re seeing more trocken and feinherb being exported to Asia,” reported the founder of website Asian Palate. “It’s a really great movement.”

Highlighting the significant differences in Asia’s regional cuisine, Cho Lee explained that pairing dishes with a wine of the right sweetness level was very important. “In Korea it’s a very big issue to introduce sweetness to a country that has no sugar on the table,” she explained.

Similarly, she generalised: “In northern Asia the focus is really on big, hearty flavours so with Riesling I’ll usually go for trocken styles, but it depends – in Japan they have a very refined use of vinegar and sweetness so I might serve feinherb or trocken with a little bit of residual sugar.”

Pointing to the “higher sugar and vinegar intensity” of Shanghai cuisine, Cho Lee suggested: “I can introduce sweeter wines there, up to kabinett.” Likewise, she added: “It’s a lot more open in southern Asia where there’s more sweetness in the food with more fruit and coconut based dishes.”

While Germany's reputation is dominated by white wines, especially Riesling, Cho Lee also expressed excitement at "all the new plantings of Pinot Noir," especially against the backdrop of red Burgundy's soaring popularity in Asia.

"We already see in Asia that Burgundy is very big," she told *db*. "It's constantly in demand in all the restaurants and there's a real quest to find very good Pinot Noir from around the world."

To highlight the enthusiasm for these wines among consumers, Cho Lee pointed to evidence from her work as a consultant for Singapore Airlines, where first class passengers are given a red wine choice between grand cru Burgundy, second growth Bordeaux and one other style local to the flight route.

"In the last year and a half we've seen there are now as many or more people choosing red Burgundy as red Bordeaux, which always used to be the major drain on our supply," she revealed.

What makes these results particularly interesting, added Cho Lee, is their message about where Asian consumers' real wine preferences currently lie. "If you're trapped on a plane and someone offers you wine, you're not doing it for show," she pointed out. "That's instant consumer feedback on what's really popular."

Setting this shift towards Pinot Noir within a broader context, Cho Lee summed up: "The trend now is towards a more elegant style that often actually pairs better with Asian cuisine."

As a result, she confirmed that Singapore Airlines is "now seriously looking at Burgundy for business class as well, but the best producers have tiny, tiny quantities."

To the question of how satisfactory an alternative German Pinot Noir represents to Burgundy, she responded: "Definitely the quality is there, but the style and personality from Germany's regions has yet to be defined clearly. It's still very producer-driven."

Within this wide stylistic spectrum of German Pinot Noir she observed: "Some producers really emulate warmer climate expressions, like the very best of Victoria, Geelong, Mornington Peninsula or Russian River Valley with that sweetness. I even saw 14.5 alcohol in one wine – they don't have any problems getting the grapes ripe."

Although admitting to the challenge that still exists for Germany's white wines in Asia, where this colour is still widely "seen as a more casual beverage," Cho Lee reported "slow but steady growth" for the country within Asia.

More importantly, she observed: "The good thing for the German Wine Institute is that you know the people you're reaching are true wine lovers – they're not doing it because it's trendy or they're going to double their money. That's a very stable base on which to grow."

By contrast, she expressed concern about the future stability of Bordeaux sales in the region, asking: "They're reaching a lot of people, sure, but who's really drinking it?"

After China bought large quantities of Bordeaux from the 2009 and 2010 vintages, Cho Lee remarked: "With the 2011s a lot of people felt disillusioned with the market – the first growths are now trading at a third of what they were in 2009 and '10."

As a result of these concerns, she concluded: "If I were a Bordeaux chateau I'd be very nervous. Are there actual consumers? Are sommeliers really following them?"