

ASIA RISING

As wine markets in the region grow in prominence, wine critics based in Asia are also receiving more attention. Just who are the top specialists who are influencing the way we are choosing our wines? Lin Weiwen finds out.

JEANNIE CHO LEE
The Hong Kong-based South Korean wine critic is the first Asian to be awarded the Master of Wine title. Her influence is far reaching. Lee is the co-chair of the Decanter Asia Wine Awards, and also judges at other international wine competitions like the International Wine Challenge and the Royal Adelaide Wine Show. She is also a wine consultant to Singapore Airlines.

What has been the development of Hong Kong's wine industry over the past few years?

It has really grown after wine duties were removed in 2008. Generally, drinkers are still quite label-conscious: let's bear in mind that there are recognisable brands for every level of wines—from the affordable ones like Jacob's Creek, to the premium quaffs like Château Pétrus—and thus it's hard for people not to move away from what they are familiar with. More people are exploring not just Burgundy wines in restaurants but also Pinot Noirs outside of France, such as those from New Zealand and Germany.

You focus a lot on pairing Asian food with wines. How do you approach such a complex subject?

It's always a challenge because you are dealing with myriad flavours and textures. I like to make my students feel comfortable with their pairings; I do not want to give a template or formulaic guide by saying, "If it's spicy, you choose a crisp, off-dry white." I want to encourage drinkers to explore a little more—such as

finding out how soya sauce can accentuate the taste of tannins—and learn what suits them since our palates have different thresholds [for different flavours]. From there, you can narrow down a few choices that work for you.

You also used Asian descriptors such as jasmine and Chinese dates to describe wines in your book, *Mastering Wine for the Asian Palate*.

Yes, the Asian descriptors are useful. Ever since the launch of my book, using Asian terms to describe wines has been on the consciousness of many Asian drinkers, and I am thankful for that. But I do not espouse replacing Western descriptors with Asian ones: it's important to learn them since they form the universal language of wine.

Wine culture also hails from Europe, and it is only respectful to learn their jargon—which I consider fundamentals—and then tailor the terms to your specific needs or audience. For example, people who have had little exposure to champagne may find tasting notes like 'butter' and 'brioche' strange or foreign but this also lets them learn about a new culture.

How can Asian wine critics lend a bigger voice to the international wine scene?

That is already happening now. At the recent Decanter Asia Wine Awards (DAWA) 2013, more than 80 percent of the 40-plus judges were Asians, so there was a strong Asian perspective.

But I think it's a pity that many Japanese wine critics focus only on writing for the Japanese market—there is no shortage of good tasters in Japan—and I hope the current generation of wine writers can pitch themselves to a global rather than domestic audience. >

What is one emerging demographic group that will have an impact on the wine market?

The economic power of women in Asia has increased over the past few years. With their higher incomes and affluent lifestyles, they are discovering the joys of wine. They'd soon play a bigger role in purchasing decisions. They also take a very different approach to enjoying wine: they are more sensitive to aromatics and flavours, and are more open-minded—they are more willing to try labels they have not heard of. Men, on the other hand, have a narrower focus, are more brand-conscious, and tend to stick to styles they prefer.

Jeannie Cho Lee will be in town on July 11 to conduct 'The Perfect Encounter' Asian Palate & Wines of the World, a Singaporean food and wine pairing event, at the LUCARIS Master of Wine Seminar.

HAYATO KOJIMA The former cabin supervisor in Japan Airlines and wine education chief for air stewards established his wine education company, Wine and Newlife, in 1997. He has judged at wine competitions like the Japan Wine Competition in Yamanashi, and the Decanter Asia Wine Awards, and has also published books on wine, such as *Test Your Knowledge of Wine*, which earned the Gourmand Cook Book Award for Best Wine Education Book in Japanese in 2003.



Japan's economic growth has been slow in recent years. Has that affected wine consumption patterns?

The economic slump means Japanese are going for cheaper wines. But they are more educated about wines than before and know how to seek out good quality ones at reasonable prices. I have noticed an increase in the number of enthusiastic students from outside the wine trade who have gone on to attain qualifications from the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET). I also see a growth in younger drinkers who are well-travelled and more open-minded in their wine selection.

What took so long for *koshu*, the Japanese grape, to attract international attention?

Koshu winemakers were not eager to export their wines to foreign markets for many years because their production numbers were small and the domestic market was enough for their business. Shigekazu Misawa of Grace Winery in Katsunuma is an exception: he took his wines abroad to show that they can compete with foreign ones. Grace Winery is one of the promising Japanese wineries to look out for.

What do you think Asia's wine experts can do to play a bigger and more influential role in the international wine scene?

Asia's wine experts should be opinion leaders on Asian wines, such as those from Japan or China. However, Asian wines are still not well-studied or documented at this stage. We should try to create a catalogue or publication to categorise the various wine styles and grapes in each wine production area, just like what the West did so extensively for their wine regions.

What can the Asian wine industry do to further promote itself abroad?

Unlike the political situation in Asia these days, it'd be good if all the wine-producing Asian countries could work together as a body to promote their region's ambrosias. English can then be the common language for the members in this group.

DANIEL LAM With more than 12 years of experience in the food and beverage industry, Lam is currently Bonham's specialist in fine and rare wines, whiskies and cognac. When it comes to keeping a finger on the pulse of what's valuable and highly sought after by private wine collectors, Lam, who is responsible for organising Bonham's wine and whisky auctions in Hong Kong, is the person to talk to.



Tell us a little about your job.

We have two auctions every year, selling about US\$2 million worth of consignments for each event. I travel mostly to Europe >