

Asia's first Master of Wine

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What wine would do justice to the explosive taste of fried chilli prawns? How about beef satay, or chicken in a spicy coconut sauce? Now imagine you are in Singapore or Malaysia and that all three dishes, plus half a dozen more besides, are set before you. How could you possibly match wine to such a panoply of competing and powerful flavours?

Korean-born Jeannie Cho Lee, the only Asian among the world's 279 Masters of Wine, spent two years trying to puzzle out precisely that. She travelled to 10 Asian food cities – Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Taipei, Tokyo, Seoul, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Mumbai – sampling dishes and figuring out which wines, if any, would make a worthy addition to an already sumptuous table. The resulting book, *Asian Palate*, published in November, is an attempt to understand food in its own context and to suggest appropriate wine without imposing alien tastes on some of the world's complex cuisines.

"I wanted to see how wine fits in to our Asian food culture," she says when I meet her in a private dining room in the China Club, a Hong Kong club that eschews the stuffiness of more traditional establishments. "I think food is place-driven," she says, drawing a parallel with what wine experts refer to as the terroir to denote the characteristics that a grape draws from its geography. "It is the entire environment from which that particular ingredient comes from, the climate, the weather, the soil, even the people. It is the same with food," she says. "I wanted to look at how to introduce wine to a table without disrespecting the harmony and the integrity of the dishes."

Lee, who grew up eating Korean food cooked by her mother in the US and who now lives in Hong Kong, says the starting point must be a true love of Asian food. "I have an Asian palate," she says. "My familiar tastes are of dried squid, salted anchovies, pungent soybean paste. You need to love the chewiness of intestines, the gelatinous and chewy texture of chicken feet and to appreciate jellyfish. You need to love that very soft mushy texture of sea cucumber and sea urchin. You can't tell someone to like that."

Lee's love of wine began in Oxford, where she spent a year as part of her degree. She remembers being served "two or three clarets and perhaps a white wine to start". Her interest piqued, she began to explore the wines of France and Italy and, when she returned to New York, she attended the famous Windows on the World Wine School, then on the top two floors of the World Trade Center. After moving to Hong Kong with her husband – whom she met at wine school – she continued to study, now with the UK-based Wine & Spirits Education Trust. At that time, wine taxes were high in Hong Kong – they were cut to zero in February 2008, transforming the city into Asia's wine capital – and there wasn't much of a wine culture. Lee pushed on, taking detailed tasting notes of every wine she came across in her job as a food and wine writer. By 2005, she felt ready to sit the daunting Master of Wine examination, a four-day test that includes four theoretical papers as well as a rigorous assault course of blind tasting, held annually in Sydney, London and Napa Valley. "I thought, 'It's a wine exam. How difficult can it be?'" she recalls. Like most first-timers, she failed. Second time around, in 2008, she cracked it.

Armed with that distinction, she set off on her 10-city quest to pair wine with Asian food. But she was determined not to force one culture on to another. Some food, she concluded, was simply better enjoyed without wine. "If you want chilli crabs in Singapore, whether the chilli or the black pepper crabs, perhaps it is better to have something thirst-quenching, like a beer, or cold water or some lemonade." She understands why some Japanese chefs stick to rice-based sake, refusing to serve wine with their food, even though wine became popular in Japan a generation before it took hold in Hong Kong and mainland China. "Wine comes with unique flavours. It can intrude or take away from the balance of the food," she says.

Her approach is to recommend wines in keeping with the flavours already present. "I would never suggest a sweet wine in northern China even though it would go well with the food in theory, because it is not culturally part of the local palate," she says. But in Thailand, where a typical meal might include coconut, fresh fruit or sweet tea, she is comfortable recommending a medium-sweet wine. For Thai cuisine, her tips include an off-dry Riesling, an aromatic Alsace Gewürztraminer and an Austrian Grüner Veltliner.

In the same way, with spicy Sichuan food, often bobbing in red hot chilli-pepper oil, her training tells her that the tannins in red wine fight, and exaggerate, the spicy flavours. "You're thinking to temper that with a white. But a lot

of Asians want that taste to linger. So people who want that pungent taste to go on and on naturally reach for the red." Whether white or red, her tip for Sichuan fare is for something with a lot of personality and not too expensive, since the grape will always lose the battle against the chilli.

Her sensibility to local tastes aside, she says some Asian food goes extraordinarily well with wine. She raves about the combination of sushi and vintage champagne, particularly if the fish is white and served with salt as opposed to soy sauce. Her preference is for something such as a 1996 Blanc de Blancs from Salon. For fattier tuna, she suggests a delicate, textured Pinot Noir. Tempura goes well with light-bodied reds with modest tannins or medium to full-bodied whites with crisp acidity.

Her native Korean food, packed with a range of flavours, demands versatile wines with refreshing acidity such as Sauvignon Blanc or a fruity Pinot Noir. Her tips for Indian food include a Sauvignon Blanc/ Semillon blend, old world full-bodied whites from Alsace or Rhône and, more surprisingly, a Rioja.

But the biggest challenge in pairing wine with Asian cuisine, she says, is the fact that Asians share their food, rather than ordering one dish at a time. "We are very communal and we like to dig in. We like to have different texture, bite and flavour combination with each mouthful. You dabble in and out of different flavours."

That makes it impossible to match one wine with one flavour. One suggestion is to open a few different wines to cater for the variety of food on offer. Alternatively, the wine can be selected with one or two highlighted dishes in mind.

Her final piece of advice is not to have exaggerated expectations. "A wine is not going to make a meal so much better," she says, "Asian flavours and the intensity of those flavours are already so high." In the long run, she says, Asians will themselves gradually work out how best to incorporate the flavours of wine into their age-old cuisines. Their discoveries may shock and delight.