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OCEANS AWAY

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Asian Food and Wine Pairs: Help!

It would be enough if Jeannie Cho Lee had just offered a handy guide to pairing Asian food dishes with appropriate wines, thus assisting Westerners grappling with some less familiar flavor combinations at their meals as well as the burgeoning numbers in Asia acquainting themselves with the fermented grape.

But this first Asian Master of Wine—the select distinction granted to the world’s most select professional palates—has published much more than that. In fact, her *Asian Palate: Savouring Asian Cuisine & Wine* (Asset Publishing, 2009 but being actively promoted by the author this year, \$98) is not so much handy as lush. It is a richly illustrated and personal appreciation of the range of regional foods from India to Singapore to Japan as well as her take on a few dozen of the most noteworthy wine varieties.

Indeed, the most significant limitation is that it's such a pretty (and expensive) book that you'd hate to spill curry or kimchi on it while preparing some tasty course.

The striking mother of four with Smith College and Harvard master's degrees takes the reader on a tasting tour while also addressing the most everyday home and restaurant conundrums: what to order or serve with dim sum (versatile, medium-bodied wines: a young Pinot Noir or a lightly-oaked white, say, Fume Blanc—but watch out for the vinegar sauces); more earthy northern Chinese dishes (fuller bodied reds—including classic Tuscans!—and white Bordeaux) and meats or fish flavored with the range of spicy Asian sauces (to generalize where the author is very specific: sufficiently fruity wines like a young Shiraz or Riesling). And for sushi and sashimi, if sake will not do? It's going to cost you on the sipping side, too: a fine Burgundian red or white.

Lee doesn't neglect her native Korea, of course, and in her precision about wines distinguishes between simply accompanying dishes and complementing or contrasting with them. She emphasizes, as aficionados will, the importance of acidity and not just the fruit in wine. And of course, there is attention paid to that

“fifth taste” of the foodie realm (on top of sweet, salty, sour and bitter), known as Umami. A clue: that element of savoriness has a relationship to the evil cousin MSG.

There’s a lot to enjoy and remember here in cooking or ordering. I will try to keep straight that I shouldn’t shrink from tannins with my Tandoori. One thing Jeannie Cho Lee cannot help with is the ridiculously high taxation on still and sparkling wine in many of the Asian locales she visits. That may be as big a deterrent as the frightening flavor mix.

Here’s a recent interview with the author:

<http://www.christies.com/features/2010-may-the-asian-palate-jeannie-cho-lee-642-1.aspx>